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ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

A BELL MAGAZINE
DELL
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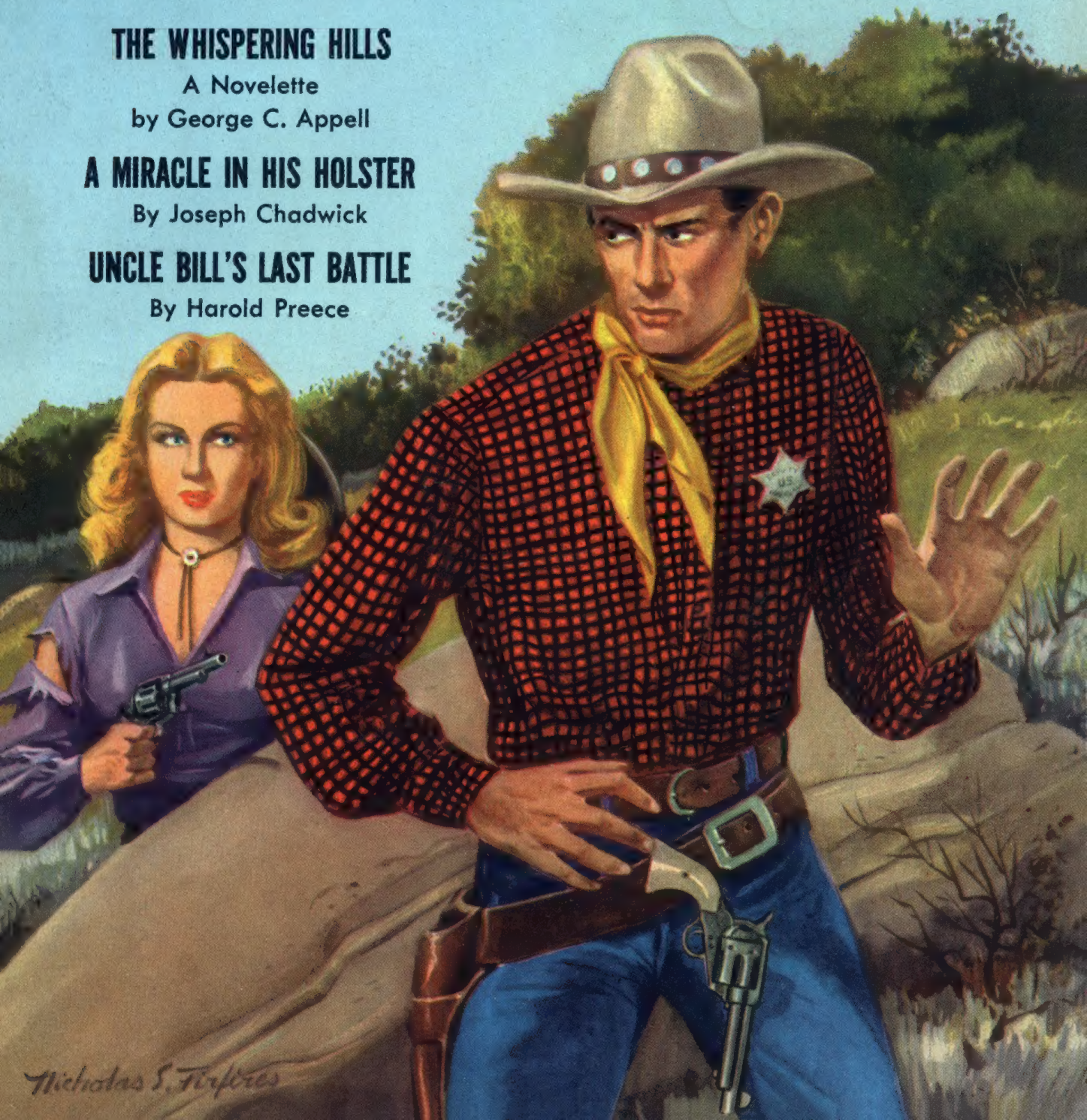
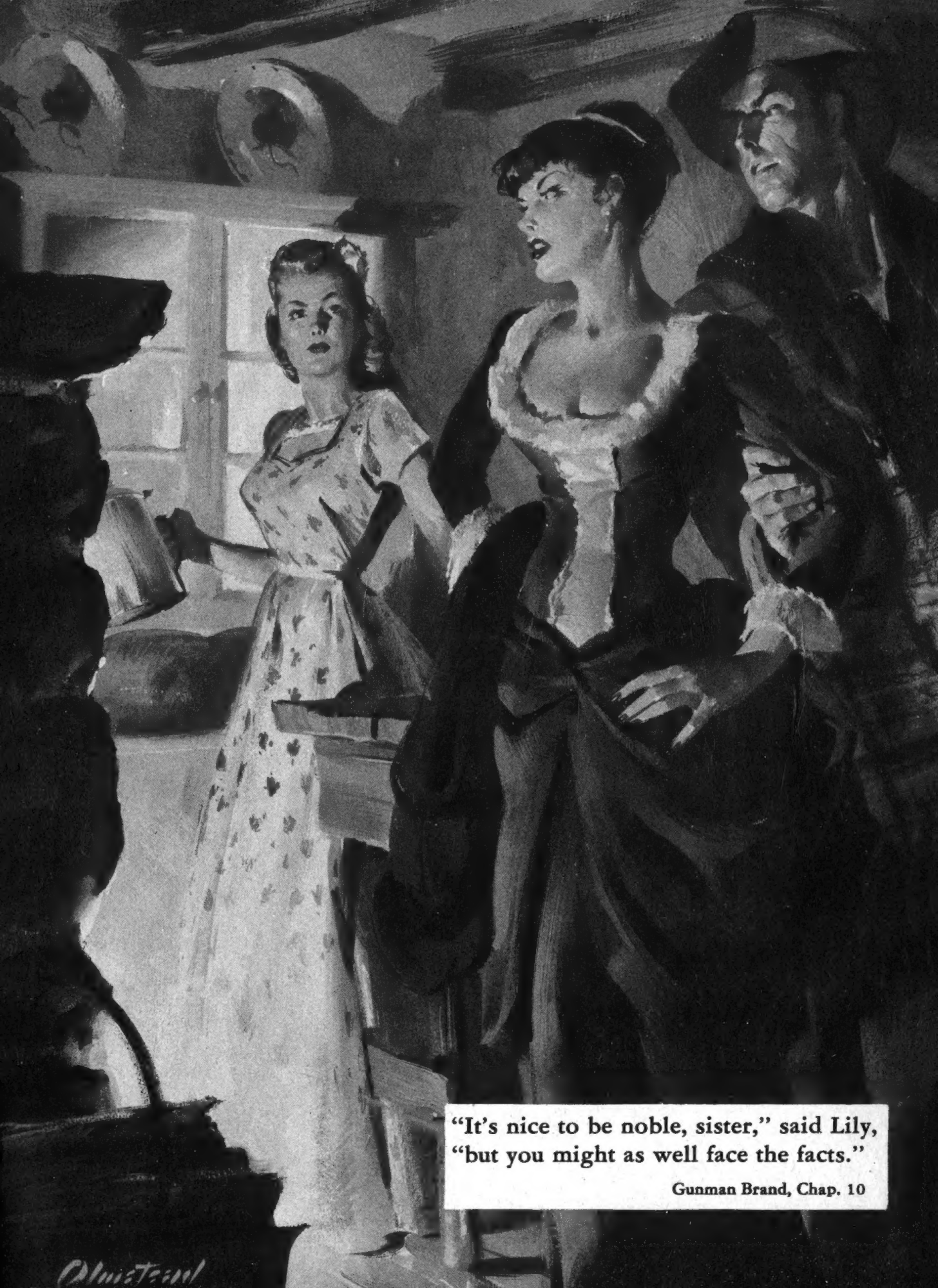
A Complete Novel **GUNMAN BRAND** By Thomas Thompson

THE WHISPERING HILLS
A Novelette
by George C. Appell

A MIRACLE IN HIS HOLSTER
By Joseph Chadwick

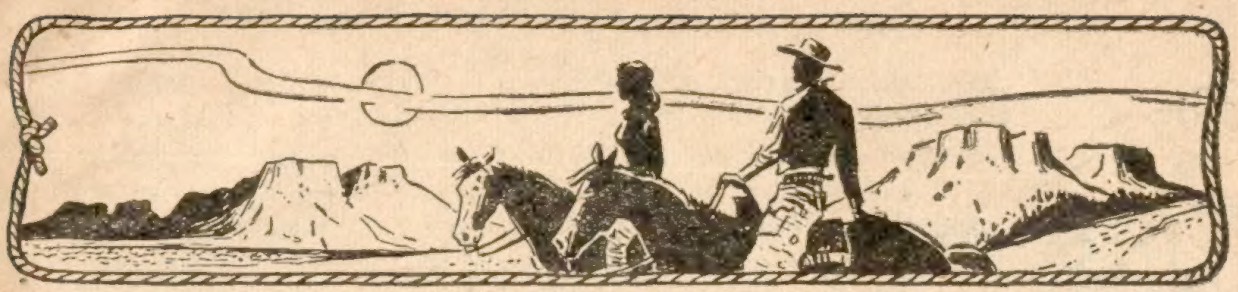
UNCLE BILL'S LAST BATTLE
By Harold Preece





"It's nice to be noble, sister," said Lily, "but you might as well face the facts."

Gunman Brand, Chap. 10



ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

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THIS MONTH'S COMPLETE NOVEL: *GUNMAN BRAND*

THE FASTEST DRAW IN OREGON! *Once Milo Stuart was proud of that designation, but no longer. For that reputation, and the performance on which it was built, brought about the death of Bert Lacey in a needless gun battle and ended forever Milo Stuart's love affair with Margaret Lacey, the dead youth's sister. Now, years later and many miles away, Milo is the marshal of Oro, gold-mining town, and gunman-in-chief for his foster brother, smooth Sam Templin. Sam, boss of Oro and owner of the Golden Lily, senses the approaching end of the gold camp's glittering wealth and plans to grab control of the Big Valley beef range. After the homesteaders have been driven out, the first big step will be to acquire the Wagon Tongue herd, driving east from Oregon in search of drought-free range. But Milo is having no part of this—for the Wagon Tongue is Glen Lacey's outfit, and Milo figures he has already brought the Laceys all the grief they can handle. Milo's dramatic break with Sam over this issue grieves Lily Devore, Sam's beauteous business partner in the Golden Lily, whose high regard for money is second only to her unavowed and seemingly hopeless love for Milo. Spurned by the Wagon Tongues, rebuffed again by Margaret Lacey, distrusted by the homesteaders, marked for death by Sam Templin's hired killers, Milo Stuart plays a lone hand. At last he stacks his gun skill against desperate odds and, while a dying Oro gasps out its final breaths, carries the battle to the enemy in grim powdersmoke reckoning.*

Thomas Thompson, author of many popular ZGWM stories, scores an Old West bull's-eye with "Gunman Brand," an action novel of unusual power.

In observance of ZGWM's fifth anniversary, the November issue of ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE will be an ALL-STAR number. It will be packed full of Old West entertainment by your favorite authors:

GUNPOWDER EMPIRE, *a short novel by L. L. Foreman*
TAPPAN'S BURRO, *a novelette by Zane Grey*
TRAITOR TOWN, *a novelette by Les Savage, Jr.*

And there will be other fine stories and features by:

William MacLeod Raine • Harry Sinclair Drago
Tom W. Blackburn • Thomas Thompson • S. Omar Barker

You can't afford to miss this November number, the greatest quarter's worth ZGWM has yet offered! Ask your newsdealer to save you a copy. On sale about September 28.

GUNMAN BRAND

An Original Book-Length Novel

By
THOMAS THOMPSON

CHAPTER ONE

Birthday Celebration

THE fall rain had kept up for six days. Wood smoke whipped around the unpainted shacks of the mining camp of Oro and the smell of the forest, a wild, dark smell, lay like a moody blanket over the town. Wind wiped rain from the window of the office and Milo Stuart, the town marshal, saw Casey Beal come out of the Golden Lily and slosh across the street, unmindful of the mud that came nearly to the top of his boots. Casey was wearing a yellow slicker and a battered Stetson that poured a steady stream of water in front of his crooked nose each time he stepped. A drunk got in the way and Casey shoved him roughly. He opened the door of the marshal's office and stood there, letting in the weather.

"I know," Milo Stuart said. "Sam wants to see me."

"Then why the hell did you make me walk across the street if you knew?" Casey said. There was anger in his eyes, a gun on his hip.

"You gotta earn your money," Milo said. "You're a fine errand boy."

"Someday," Casey said, "you're gonna make somebody mad."

"Someday," Milo said, "I'm not gonna give a damn."

He stood up, a saddle-marked man who hadn't ridden hard lately. His forehead was still stained with old sun, his eyes puckered with it. His hair was curly and dark and rebellious and there was rebellion in his eyes and in the set of his mouth. He wore a long black coat and under that was a gun belt and a .44 with a gutta-percha butt. There was the comforting feel of a substantial amount of cash in his pock-

et. It was more than a man could save from a marshal's salary. He took a battered, medium-brim Stetson from a rack and set it on his head at a careless angle.

"All right," he said. "Run back and tell God I'm on my way."

"I hope this is it, Stuart," Casey Beal said. His eyes were hot and steady. "I really hope it is."

"So you can have my job?" Milo said.

"So I can have your hide, Stuart," Beal said. "That's what I'd like." He turned and went back into the rain, leaving the door open behind him.

Milo Stuart shook his head. There was nothing dangerous about Casey. All talk. If the others were like Casey there wouldn't be anything to worry about.

Milo went outside and the smell of wet pine and rotted leaves and freshly turned earth was thick in the wind. He stood there a second, not seeing the shacks or the ornate front of the Golden Lily, and he remembered a little spread in the Blue Mountains of Oregon where grass had grown belly-high on the black land of a beaver valley. Five years ago. My God, was that all? It seemed like fifty! He turned up the collar of his coat and walked down to the corner to cross the street on a plank that lay half submerged in the mud. He saw a dozen men and none of them spoke to him but all of them glanced at him from the corners of their eyes.

A small, ratty-looking man in soggy woolen clothes was standing near the door of the Golden Lily. He saw Milo and half turned, trying to hide his face. Milo reached out and gripped the little man's shoulder and spun him around.

"I told you to leave town, Hammer," Milo said.

"Damn it, Marshal," the little man complained. "Be reasonable. I ain't done nothin'—"

"You make a fuss," Milo said. "The Golden Lily don't like customers who make a fuss. Get out of town." He went into the saloon.

The place was teeming with miners and freighters and speculators and drifters. It was ten in the morning, but down at the far end of the huge plank-floored room six scantily clad girls were dancing on a tiny, kerosene-lit stage. The bar was forty feet long, entirely mirrored, and over half the room was cluttered with gambling-devices of every nature. He saw Lily Devore at the roulette wheel, saw her turn the wheel over to an idle dealer and start through the crowd toward him, pausing to smile and joke with every man in the place, her dark eyes alive, the overhead chandeliers glinting against her jet-black hair.

A towering, broken-faced man known as The Finn pushed his way toward Lily and tried to put his arm around her waist. She slipped away from him easily.

"Lily," The Finn said, "I'm about to strike it rich. I'll be worth a million and it's all yours."

Lily Devore twisted a button on the front of The Finn's shirt. "Get another million and we'll talk it over," she said. She had a way of lowering her eyelids and making her voice husky. She came on toward Milo and the laughter and good humor moved along with her. Milo always thought of her as surrounded by laughter.

"Hello, Milo," she said, and now the false huskiness was gone from her voice. She stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek. "Happy birthday."

He wiped his cheek with the back

of his hand. "Birthday? I'd forgotten."

"How does it feel to be twenty-eight?"

"No older than when I was eighty," he said.

She held her skirt and made a little half turn. "How do you like my new dress?"

"What happened to the top of it?" he said.

"The same thing that's going to happen to the top of your head if you don't quit acting up," she said. "It got cut off."

He grinned at her and for a moment there was a lurking handsomeness on his ample mouth and around the corners of his eyes. His nose had been broken once but somehow the slight hump was an improvement. It went well with the rugged planes of his face, the nearly prominent cheekbones.

"I hope I look as pretty without my head," he said.

She looked up at him and now her words were for him alone. "I planned a little celebration," she said. "Supper, a bottle of wine. Just Sam and you and me."

"Sorry," he said. "I can't make it. An old man of twenty-eight needs lots of sleep."

There was something close to anger in her eyes. "An old man of twenty-eight ought to have sense enough to know a good thing when he sees it."

"You run your life, Lily," he said bluntly. "I'll run mine." He pushed by her and walked down the length of the bar.

The man called Wyoming was standing at the end of the bar and he looked up now, his amber eyes as expressionless as a snake's. He had appointed himself personal bodyguard to Sam Templin; he was capable of handling the job. He neither pressed Milo nor backed down from him but gave him the cool respect that one gunman gives another.

"The boss is waiting," he said.

The brooding rebellion that had been building all day in Milo Stuart spilled over. The continued arguments with Sam, the worry as Sam continued to surround himself with men like Wyoming, and now this business of the Wagon Tongue trail herd— He turned abruptly and said:

"Tell him he can find me at my office. It's too wet for me to be out today."

He pushed through the crowd and went back outside. He had seen the half smile on Wyoming's lips and he could feel Lily staring at him. *To hell with Sam*, he thought. *He's getting too big for his pants.*

The wind picked up and the rain pounded harder against the shake roof of the little office. Once he had appreciated rain like that. It made for good spring feed. But that was a long time back—too many dreams ago—Margaret Lacey ago. That was in Oregon. He rummaged idly through the top drawer of his desk, found the picture and stared at it. The picture didn't say so but the eyes were blue, the hair honey color. The picture did show the seriousness around the mouth, the tiny worry over little things. Little things. Like the killing of her brother. He turned the picture face down and closed the drawer.

Sam Templin was coming across the street. Funny, but you could feel Sam Templin even before you saw him.

He was a handsome man, a man who had made and lost twenty thousand dollars by the time he was twenty-five and now, at thirty, he was after a big-

ger fortune. A man to admire, people always said. A man to look up to. But ambition was a funny thing. It got out of hand with some people. It was geting out of hand with Sam. Sam Templin rattled the door.

"Come in, Stinky," Milo said. "It's not locked."

Sam Templin brought his importance into the room with him. His hair was dark and long and faintly gray at the temples. His face was broad and cleanshaven and there was a deep dimple in his chin. He was ruggedly handsome and keenly aware of it. It bothered him that Lily Devore could be his business partner and never be impressed by his handsomeness. He was visibly annoyed but his voice didn't show it.

"What's the matter, kid?" he said. "Afraid of wet feet?"

Milo grinned. "Your belly's beginning to bulge," he said. "You needed the exercise. I promised your mother I'd look out for you."

"That makes us even," Sam said. "I promised her I'd look out for you." He sat down and took a cigar from his vest pocket. "You worry me, Milo."

"Even again," Milo said. "Now where do we go?"

Sam Templin could be a mighty pleasant man. He was pleasant now. "Sorry I blew up last night," he said. "I had a lot of things on my mind. I'd like to talk it over."

"It's no use, Sam," Milo said.

"You've had a mighty easy touch here."

"Too easy, maybe," Milo said.

"It can be a damn sight easier," Sam said. "There's just so much gold in the ground. Some of the claims are petering out already. There'll always be a market for beef, and I mean to get into it."

"It's a good decision if you go at it the right way," Milo said. "I just don't like the company you keep."

There was honest affection in Sam's eyes. "Look, kid, I'm not one to get sentimental. You know me better than that. But damn it, kid, you're like a brother to me. We were raised together. I want to see you get a break."

"Besides that," Milo said, "you need me."

Anger came quickly to Sam Templin's deep-brown eyes and disappeared again. "All right," he said, "I need you. You know more about cows in five minutes than I'll know in the rest of my life. You want to go into the cattle business. You always have wanted it."

"I'm in the cow business," Milo said.

Sam waved his hand impatiently. "A handkerchief-size valley and twenty cows. What the hell kind of a deal is that?"

"A start," Milo said. "I like it."

Sam was having trouble with his temper. "Damn it, I'm offering you a million dollars. We can be the biggest outfit in Montana."

"Starting with Glen Lacey's herd?"

Color touched Sam Templin's cheeks. "What the hell difference does it make? Glen Lacey trailed a herd out from Oregon. He'll want to sell it, won't he?"

"Not if I know Glen Lacey," Milo said. His eyes were bleak and he was remembering. "And I know him."

Sam Templin used an old argument. "I've never asked you for much, Milo. I've done everything in the world I could to help you—"

"Let's don't lie to each other, Sam," Milo said. "We know each other too well for that. Let's admit you've helped me when it would help you."

"All right," Sam said. The anger he

was holding back put an edge to his voice. "I need you on this deal."

Milo reached down and drew the .44 from his holster. For a second he weighed the gun in his hand and then he laid it on the desk.

"You need this, Sam," he said. "It's no good without me on the end of it."

"That's a hell of a thing to say to me," Sam said.

"Is it, Sam?" He smiled. "Suppose you can't buy Glen Lacey's herd—?"

Sam's teeth bit through his cigar. "I'm going into the cattle business, Milo."

"Tell me, Sam," Milo said pleasantly, "does the stink ever blow back on you when you walk into a strong wind?"

The anger was full-blown in Sam Templin now. He stood up, a big man, heavier than Milo Stuart. "Before you get dirty," he said, "you might remember that if it hadn't been for my folks—"

"Sure, Sam," Milo interrupted. "If it hadn't been for your folks I would have starved or frozen by a burned-up wagon. If it hadn't been for you I'd still be working for eighty a month as a marshal in some run-down town—"

"Killing kids like Bert Lacey?" There was a knife edge to Sam Templin's voice.

The silence was heavy between them. "You've said that once too often, Sam," Milo said finally.

Templin's voice was low in his throat. "Just what the hell's the matter with you? Has that tin badge I hung on you gone to your head?"

"Maybe," Milo said. "Or maybe I'm trying to remember the man you started out to be."

Sam Templin's eyes were darker now, almost black. There was a smile on his lips but the blood was close under his skin. He got up and opened the door and held it, deliberately letting the rain blow into the room.

"Let me know what you decide, will you, Marshal?" The last word hung in the room after Templin slammed the door.

There was no real anger in Milo. It was more disgust and it was mostly directed at himself. He should have seen the danger signals six months ago; he knew that now; hindsight was always easy. He had strung along with Sam and if he'd had to be rough at times it was because it was a rough town. He hadn't liked it when Sam had hired Wyoming and Travis Mort and Newt Tregor and he had said so, but he had let it go. Being a bouncer in the Golden Lily wasn't a schoolboy's job.

It was the news that a trail herd from Oregon was heading this way that brought things to a head. That trail herd belonged to Glen Lacey, which put Milo Stuart right in the middle.

That was what hurt as much as anything—Sam catching him in a bind that way and then squeezing him. Sam had been so damned sure of himself. Milo stared at the desk top and it seemed as if the picture in the drawer was looking back at him, right through the top of the desk. He felt the eyes of the photograph staring at him, accusing him, hating him. The picture of Margaret Lacey. The eyes were saying, *You killed my brother you killed my brother*—saying it over and over in the same maddening way they had been

saying it for five years. He grabbed his hat and slammed it on his head and hurried out into the rain, not even bothering to button his coat.

The livery stable was at the far end of the street and he hurried that way, the rain beating against his face. The stableman looked up from a month-old newspaper and peered over the top of his glasses.

"Want your rig, Marshal?" he said.

Milo didn't answer. There was a rain-drenched horse standing at the manger—a blood bay, big, heavy-boned. Tossed carelessly onto the lip of the manger was a plain saddle, single-rigged. An Oregon horse and an Oregon saddle.

"Where's the rider of that outfit?" Milo demanded.

"In back," the stableman said. He had a feed room in back and he rented out floor space where a man could spread his blankets.

Milo pushed open the door and nearly stumbled on the man asleep there. The man threw back his blankets and sat up suddenly, his hand going for the gun thrust in his waistband. There was a flare of recognition in his faded eyes, no surprise. He wasn't a man to get surprised about things.

"I told you to leave me alone, Milo," the old man said. His hand moved away from his gun.

"I'll make the decisions, Clete," Milo said. He had trouble with his voice.

"Since you got a star on your vest," the old man said, "I reckon you can talk that way. You always did hide behind a star, as I recollect it." The old man's eyes were brilliantly blue and beady, his voice high-pitched and cracked.

"Why did you come here?"

"Not looking for you," the old man said. "Maybe Glen Lacey is."

"You tell Lacey there's no worthwhile graze around here. You tell him to take his cows straight through into the Galatin."

"Still making threats, are you, Milo?"

Milo Stuart shook his head. "Giving advice, Clete. Good advice."

"I'll tell Glen Lacey about it," Clete Benson said. "I'll tell him the advice came from you."

"Do that," Milo said. He drew a five-dollar gold piece from his pocket and tossed it to the old man. "Here, buy yourself a drink. Compliments of the town."

He turned and hurried outside, the blood pounding in his temples. Halfway to the Golden Lily he saw the ratty little man he had ordered out of town. His name was Elmer Hammer, a Texas man who ran a few cows in the valley. He called to the man and Hammer turned and started to run. Milo overtook him easily.

"You," he said, gripping the cowman's shoulder.

"I'm leaving, damn it," Hammer protested.

"I made a mistake," Milo said. "I got the wrong man. Stay in town if you want. Play the wheel all you want. I hope you break the damn thing. Just stay sober and keep your hands off the girls, that's all."

The little man stood there, scratching the back of his neck. "My place ain't for sale," he said, "so don't waste your time bein' decent all of a sudden."

He turned and walked into the Golden Lily and Milo entered the saloon just behind him. Hammer headed straight for Lily Devore's wheel. He saw Lily say something before shoving out some chips; he saw the quick

glance of annoyance she turned in his direction. He sauntered over toward the wheel and Newt Tregor, the lookout, got in his way.

"You made a mistake, didn't you, Marshal?" Tregor said. He was a dark man, thick through. He jerked his head toward Elmer Hammer.

Milo Stuart shook his head. "No mistake, Newt," he said. "Don't you make one. Let the little man play the wheel. He's a friend of mine." His eyes held Tregor. Tregor let his gaze wander down to Milo's gun.

"No skin off my nose," Tregor said. He went back and mounted the high stool near the faro layout. Milo strolled on over to the wheel.

"What's the matter, Lily?" he said. "Something wrong?"

"I don't know," she said. She called in one of the dealers and when she and Milo were a few feet from the wheel she gripped Milo's coat. "What's the idea, Milo?" she said. "I thought we wanted Hammer to decide he didn't like this country."

"I've changed my mind about things," Milo said. "It's a free country, you know."

She looked at him closely and a faint smile played around her lips. "All right, big boy," she said. "Be independent. It's your birthday present."

"That's right," he said. "From me to me."

She put her hands on her hips and looked at him a long time. "You know," she said finally, "it looks good on you. Maybe you ought to wear it more often."

"Maybe I will," he said. He walked on through the crowd, back toward Sam Templin's office.

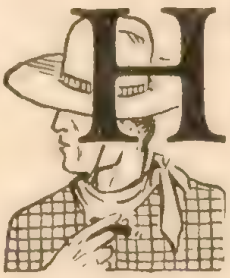
Templin was sitting at his desk, talking to Wyoming. Sam looked up, the old look of satisfied certainty in his eyes.

"Hi, kid," he said. "Something on your mind?"

"Yeah, Sam," Milo said. "Got a present for you. For all the nice things you've done for me." He reached up and unpinned the marshal's badge and tossed it on Sam's desk. "Give that to Casey Beal," he said. "He's always wanted it."

Chapter Two

Ex-Marshal



HE WENT back to his office and he kept thinking that it was odd how his birthday had suddenly become important. He had the feeling that a long time from now when he looked back on this day it wouldn't be the look in his foster brother's eyes that he would remember. It would be the fact that this day had been his birthday. The day he grew up.

A small, tuneless whistle puckered his lips as he cleaned out his desk. He didn't pause to look at the photograph, but he packed it away in his long unused war bag. He was nearly finished and the clock said twelve noon when he heard the sound at the back door.

The old habit that he had tried to break dropped his hand to the gun on his hip and then he drew his hand away, opening it and closing it, hating that involuntary movement. *The fastest draw in Oregon.* He had been proud of that once. Hellishly proud. And it was hell how a dead man's eyes could show you what an empty thing was that kind of pride.

He crossed the room into the tiny

private office. The back door of this room, which he kept locked, opened out on an alley. Someone was trying a key in the lock. He waited, then unlatching the door from the inside, he pulled it open with force, dragging Lily Devore into the room. The rain had sneaked under a spangled shawl and her black hair curled around her face. Her lips were darkly red, her eyes alive with anger. She stood there glaring at him and he grinned at her.

"There's a front door," he said.

"For all I know I might get shot trying to use it." She whipped off the shawl and shook the drops of glittering water from her hair. "All right," she said, "start talking."

"Well, let's see," he said. "Once upon a time—"

"You know what I'm talking about. Sam is about to tear the place apart, he's so mad. What did you say to him?"

"Maybe it's what I didn't say," Milo said. "Forget it. I told you once today, you run your life and I'll run mine."

"Until they start crossing each other," she said angrily. "The Golden Lily happens to be half mine. It happens to be making money."

"That's important, isn't it?" he said.

"To me it's the only thing in the world that is important," she said.

He was grinning now. "Did Elmer Hammer's luck hold?"

"I'm not talking about that," she said. "What's a thousand-dollar loss on the wheel? It was Sam's idea to run the little mutt out of town, not mine. I was willing to pay cash for his outfit. I'm talking about us—you, me, Sam—"

"You're talking about you and Sam," he said. "I'm out."

"Milo, what's the matter with you?"

"I'm twenty-eight," he said.

He liked the hot anger that could flare her eyes—anger that could make her slap a man and drive him across a room. He had seen her do it. He reached out and gripped her wrists. For a moment he was looking deep into those dark eyes and he saw the anger melt away and he was strangely disturbed.

"Things are beginning to break right for us," she said.

"That's the trouble, Lily," he said. "People like you and Sam do better when things are going rough. If I stick around and take orders things might get even easier. So just say I don't know a good thing when I see it. I'm through. Quits. Finished." He released her wrists suddenly and walked back to the main room and picked up his war bag. "It's been good knowing you, Lily."

She followed him and suddenly she reached out and gripped his arm. She was a tall, well-formed girl. She was surprisingly strong. She turned him half around. "Milo, why? What one thing?"

His grin was crooked. "Look," he said, "a drunk gets out of line, I throw him out. I'm good at that. I got muscles. Somebody tries to walk away with the cash box, I make faces and scare him. That's my job. That's what I hired on to do."

"Sam and I haven't asked you to do anything else," she protested. "There's no law within fifty miles of here. We had to have some protection."

"Protection, sure," he said. "But not gun-fighting. I quit that five years ago, remember?" He reached out and patted her shoulder. "There's something nice about you, Lily. You and Sam are just right for each other. Raise a lot of little Sams, but don't let 'em hire gun fighters. Not even me."

She slapped him, a stinging blow that brought the blood to his cheek. For a second that swift temper he had fought so hard to control was like a knife slashing at a hard knot in his stomach. He dropped the war bag to the floor and he saw her eyes, wide now, suddenly soft and then filled with tears. She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth and stood there staring at him as if he were a stranger.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He could barely hear the words. He picked up the war bag.

"I'll stop by the place for a drink," he said. He walked out the front door into the rain and the mud and he headed for the livery stable without glancing back. Under his yellow slicker the .44 was heavy and familiar against his leg.

The livery man was sitting on a three-legged stool just inside the door, still scanning the old newspaper. He looked up, his eyes watery from straining to see the print in the dim light.

"Howdy, Marshal," he said. "Want your rig?"

"My horse," Milo said.

"Horse? Why, Marshal, you ain't rode that critter for three weeks."

"Someday when we've got a lot of time we'll talk about it," Milo said. "Get my horse if you haven't sold him."

"Sold him? Oh, I see." The livery man laughed with a high, thin cackle. "You're just jokin!" He picked up a hackamore and shrugged into a slicker. "Sold him," he said and he went out into the pasture, his shoulders shaking under the slicker.

"Funny what a man thinks is funny."

The voice was dry and sure, close to Milo's elbow. He whirled suddenly and Clete Benson, the Wagon Tongue rider, was standing there. He hadn't shaved or cleaned up.

"Yeah," Milo said. "Funny."

"Like you tossin' me a five-dollar gold piece," Clete Benson said.

"Forget it."

"I been wonderin' iffen I should take you down and shove it down your throat or just beat hell out of you and let it go at that."

Milo turned, giving his full attention to the little rider. The man was all of sixty—maybe more. His skin was brightly red from sun and wind, his eyes washed pale by years of squinting at distance. The knuckles on his hands were like marbles. He was no more than five foot five—a good six inches shorter than Milo. He was mad and it was the deep anger of hurt pride.

"A man gets out of touch with people," Milo said quietly. "I apologize."

The old man took the gold piece from his pocket and tossed it into a pile of fresh manure behind one of the stalls. "There it is if you want it," he said.

"I don't," Milo said, "but I'll buy you a drink."

Clete Benson thought on it a long time. "Why not?" he said finally. "I'm thirsty."

"All right," Milo said. "There's a little place right around the corner."

"If a man drinks out of a spring where a skunk's been drinkin' it don't make the skunk smell better," Clete said.

"Or the man smell worse," Milo said. "You want the drink or not?"

Clete stopped with one foot half raised and looked hard at Milo Stuart, started to say something, and then decided against it. He had been on the

trail four months. He was broke and he was thirsty. It never had been his fight.

"I want it," he said.

But three drinks of good whisky loosened Clete Benson's tongue. The shock of meeting Milo Stuart here wore off and an old man's love for remembering got the upper hand. He hadn't seen Stuart since the killing. He never had liked young Bert Lacey. He nursed his fourth drink and started feeling around the edges.

"Old Glen Lacey ain't changed much," he said.

"That's fine," Milo Stuart said.

"Neck full of hell, that old boy. Onery as they make 'em."

"Grass good this year in Oregon?"

"What grass? What little did come up the sheep et and even if there was grass what good would it do? Everybody's got cows. No place to sell 'em."

"So you decided to trail east."

"I didn't decide nothin'," Clete Benson said. "I just keep my mouth shut and don't decide nothin'." He downed the drink and licked his lips. Damn, it felt good to have a little whisky sloshin' around inside a man. "I ain't never decided nothin' about nothin'." He glanced at Milo out of the corner of his eye. "Lot of folks feel that way."

"Where are the Wagon Tongues camped?"

Be careful now, Clete told himself. *Maybe this younker is honin' for a shoot-out with old man Lacey. Not that Lacey wouldn't like that—*

"Out yonder," he said.

"That's close enough," Milo said. "I'll see you."

The old man took the bull by the horns. What the hell, everyone knew Bert Lacey had been a bad one. If Milo Stuart hadn't nailed him someone else would have. He said, "Look, younker, I'm older than you are. When a man gets my age it don't make a hell of a lot of difference how soon he goes, so if you want to haul out that hogleg of yours right now you just hop to it, but I got something to say."

"Sorry, I haven't got time," Milo said. He took his change from the bar and slipped it into his front pocket.

"Margaret and the Missus are along," Clete Benson said quietly. "Glen Lacey ain't sellin' beef, he's lookin' for a place to settle down." He downed his drink. "Margaret's a fine girl and I like her. I'd kill a man that hurt her again."

It wasn't anger that hit Milo Stuart. It was a fierce desire to hear more—to know if her eyes were still that shade of smoky blue, her hair still as rich as a Umatilla grain field. It was homesickness and pain and the tired bitterness of mistakes and longing that jellied the insides of a man. He hid it all—or thought he did. His lip curled and his voice was hard.

"When I want to know anything, old man," he said, "I'll ask you." He hurried outside and Clete Benson stood there a long time, his head down, staring at the bar top.

The bartender sauntered down the bar. He was a fat man. He looked as if he might have been a farmer at one time. He had a dull, bovine way about him.

"You want another drink?" he said.

Clete Benson thought of his empty pocket. He thought of the Oregon drought and the overstocked ranges and ranches as big as Glen Lacey's Wagon Tongue going broke.

"No," he said, "I don't want another drink."

"Then move along," the bartender

said. "I don't like the company you keep."

"You should have told the company," Clete Benson said. "You really should have."

He walked slowly toward the door, keeping close to the bar. When he was near the end of the bar his hand reached out and chopped across a half-dozen glasses that were standing there. They fell to the floor and smashed. Clete Benson tilted his battered hat down over his eyes and stepped outside.

Chapter Three

Blood-Red Peaks

MILO hadn't expected to ride out of town without Sam's making another try. He knew Sam Templin too well for that. You couldn't be raised with a man—be brought up with a man as his own brother without knowing that much. And you couldn't help liking that man a little, regardless of how much you sometimes knew he was wrong. He rode slowly, down the center of the muddy street. He wasn't a man who hid from things.

He saw Sam on the porch of the Golden Lily. Sam was smoking a cigar and he was biting it too hard. He removed it from his mouth and spat once.

"Let's talk it over, Milo," he said.

"We've said it, Sam," Milo said. "Too many times."

"A drink for the road, then?"

"Why not?" Milo said. "It will be the last one."

He reined up to the hitchrail and dismounted, wondering why he was doing this, knowing it was because it was hard to say good-by. It angered him to realize that Sam had counted on this. Sam had always known how he would react, way back in those days when they had played Beckon, Beckon, Who's Got the Beckon? Sam, caught, would call for a beckon, knowing Milo would answer. And Milo, trying to give Sam a break, would answer the call and get caught himself.

Big brother, Milo thought to himself. *You don't know how much that means to an orphan kid, Sam.*

They went into the saloon together, as they had a hundred times before. Some men spoke to them, some didn't. That was all right. It was always that way. Milo paused at the bar and Sam motioned with his head.

"Let's go on back."

Milo shrugged. It wasn't hard now, now that he had made up his mind to call it quits. He could listen to the same old line, the same old wheedling. The same old reminding of how Sam Templin's folks had picked him up after the Indian massacre—the old sentimental business of how Sam Templin's folks had loved Milo Stuart like a son. Sam used all the weapons at hand, always. He walked on back to the door of Sam's office.

"Go on in," Sam said. "I'll just be a minute." He shouldered his way back through the crowd.

Milo had a feeling Lily Devore would be in there. She was. She was sitting in a chair at the corner of Sam's desk, nervously, Milo thought. He grinned inwardly. Yes, Sam used all the weapons.

"You got your speech all ready, Lily?" he said.

"I did have," Lily said. "Now it's no good."

He pulled out a straight chair, strad-

dled it backward, folding his hands on the top rail. "It's a shame to waste it," he said. "Let's hear it."

"Brother love and mother love," she said tonelessly. "More money than you've ever seen. A full partnership."

"And the land of the free and the home of the brave," he said. He realized suddenly that she was crying and the senseless banter was a dead thing between them. He had never seen her actually cry before.

"Do you know why a woman cries?" she said. There was a curl of bitterness at the corners of her mouth.

"I never asked."

"She's either happy or in love."

"You happy?"

She shook her head. "Not a bit, Milo."

"So what's wrong with being in love?" he said. "Sam's a good bet. A little ambitious, maybe, but a good bet. A good business man, handsome—"

"Quit it, Milo."

"He's crazy about you. He always has been."

"I said quit it."

He stood up and stretched. "I guess that about does it, Lily. You know I'm going to try to warn Glen Lacey that he's heading for trouble if he tries to settle here?"

"Yes, I know that."

"I figure that's the least I can do."

"You're still in love with her, aren't you?"

He came and stood by her and put his hand on her shoulder. She reached up and took his hand in both of hers and held it hard against her cheek.

"I wouldn't listen to that question from anyone but you, Lily," he said quietly.

"You're wrong, Milo. You can't blow up a flame after the fire's gone out. I know about things like that."

"You can strike another match, maybe."

"If the sandpaper isn't wet," she said.

The door opened and Sam Templin came in. He had a bottle and three glasses. "Damn near forgot it was your birthday," he said. "Sit down, kid. If I said anything to hurt your feelings, I'm sorry about it."

"I ran out of feeling a few years back," Milo said. "Thanks for the ride, Sam. It was fun while it lasted."

"Look, kid—"

"No go. Good luck to you two. To make it certain, fire those gun hawks and forget it. They won't quit, the way I'm doing."

White lines formed at either side of Sam Templin's mouth. "It's hard sometimes," he said, "to tell if a man is noble or yellow."

"Forget you said that, Sam," Milo said softly.

"Well, what the hell am I to think?" Sam exploded. "Glen Lacey broke you. He ran you out of Oregon. He told the world that if you ever came back he'd shoot you on sight."

"That's enough, Sam."

"You haven't been back, have you? You've been sneaking around like a scared kid and now just because Glen Lacey's in the country you're tucking your tail between your legs and running like a feist dog—"

The open-hand blow caught Sam Templin across the mouth and knocked him back against the wall. His right hand darted swiftly toward a shoulder holster and then Lily was in front of him, holding his arms. Milo Stuart stood there, rubbing the palm of his hand across the front of his shirt.

"That was a mistake, Milo," Sam

said. He was breathing heavily, his nostrils flared.

"We've made plenty of 'em, you and me," Milo said.

"As long as you're running, run a damn long way," Sam said.

Milo turned abruptly and walked out through the door, leaving it open behind him. He saw two of Sam's men at the close end of the bar, Travis Mort and the man called Wyoming. Newt Tregor, the thick-faced man with the constant cigar, was still on shift in the lookout chair near the faro layouts. All three watched Milo with disinterested eyes, saying nothing. He elbowed his way through the crowd and out onto the sidewalk.

He was untying his horse when he saw Casey Beal. Beal was wearing the discarded marshal's badge on his unbuttoned vest. Beal grinned, exposing the space of a missing tooth on the left side of his mouth.

"I told you someday you'd make somebody mad," he said.

"You did at that," Milo said. He untied the reins and put one foot in the stirrup.

Casey Beal spread his feet and spat through the space in his teeth. "That Elmer Hammer," he said. "That cowman friend of yours. He broke a law. Spit on the sidewalk, I think it was."

"That's your business," Milo said.

"Sure," Casey said. "It's my business. Like you. You're my business too."

Milo took his foot from the stirrup and let the split reins fall to the mud. "In what way, Casey?"

"Like keeping you out of town, maybe."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." Casey hitched at his gun belt. "You know," he said, thumbing back his hat, "I have a hard time figgerin' Sam sometimes. Sam's a smart man but he's sentimental, I reckon. He don't want you to get hurt none. He just wants you to keep ridin' if you've made up your mind to go. Sam told me that."

"It was nice of him."

"Me, now," Beal said, "I ain't sentimental at all. I hated your guts the first time I set eyes on you."

"Mutual, Casey."

"So don't get in my way, Stuart." Casey hitched at his gun belt again. "There's gonna be a lot of new laws in this town. You won't be able to keep up with all of 'em. You come around here you might break one of them new laws and then I'd have to manhandle you. That clear, Stuart?"

Milo had stepped back up onto the sidewalk. "I guess I forgot something, Casey," he said.

"Yeah? What?"

"Everytime I quit a job I always made sure the man who was taking my place knew what he was up against."

Casey gave a short laugh. "I'll make out."

"It worries me," Milo said. "You're getting off to a bad start."

"Get out of town, Stuart."

Milo Stuart took two steps forward. His hand reached out and gripped the loose flap of Casey Beal's vest. He jerked the man forward, hard, and at the same time he tripped him. Beal half fell and then he caught himself, his face bloated with anger and embarrassment. He started to reach for his gun, thought better of it, and brought his fist up in an arc that would have torn a man's head off had it connected.

Milo leaned his head back. Nothing more. He caught Beal across the side of the head with a back-handed slap

of his left hand and then cracked him on the chin with his right fist. Beal staggered back and Milo followed him, no anger in him now, only sureness, the sureness of practice. He hit Beal again and caught his boot toe on the back of Beal's heel. Beal spilled over backward into the mud. He floundered there, cursing, fighting for footing, and then he drew his gun. It was slimy with mud and slipped in his hand. Milo kicked him in the arm muscle. He kicked him hard and the hand opened and the gun dropped. Milo put his foot on the gun and pressed it deep into the mud.

"You shouldn't have tried that, Casey," he said.

He turned and went back to his horse, seeming to move casually, actually moving with great speed. When he was in the saddle he spurred hard. The horse, grain-fed and idle for weeks, gave a grunt of protest and started to pitch. Milo jerked him around, just as Casey Beal got his footing. The horse reared and Beal screamed, throwing up his arms to protect his face. Milo rode close and Beal, struggling to get out of the way, slipped and fell flat on his face. Milo Stuart rode down the street, easily handling the fractious horse who, now that he realized the precariousness of the footing, had decided to quiet down.

For a short moment there Milo Stuart had been himself. All that old wildness, that cocksureness that had always been a part of him, had come to the surface and it was like tasting a favorite spicy dish after a long abstinence.

Then it was gone and the dark moodiness was back on him and he was remembering a girl and that girl's dead brother—Bert Lacey. A likable kid, two years younger than Milo. But a spoiled kid. The only son of a man who had wanted a dozen sons. A son who drank too much and gambled too much and fought too much and was forgiven by a father who did none of those things. A trouble kid, doomed to disaster. And Milo Stuart, only a kid himself, was a marshal whose business was disaster. He had owned a little spread, a few heifers, a good bull. He had asked Margaret Lacey to marry him and she had said yes. Damn the memories—

He took the trail that led toward Little Gravelly. Not much feed high up this year. A man couldn't hold a herd long in that country. He'd have to move it, down this way to the valleys. Feed was scarce higher up and it could snow hard anytime.

I'll tell him what he's up against, Milo thought to himself. *I'll do that much for you, Bert. I'll do more if need be. Then maybe you'll quit staring at me out of every campfire—out of every glass of whisky. Then maybe you'll tell Margaret it wasn't my fault.*

The trail led up a canyon past scattered claims that lay like sores along the virgin stream. Men clawed in the muck and became stained with the red mud until it would no longer wash from the seams of their battered hands. In one place a belt of aspen a hundred yards wide had been slashed down to make way for a three-foot flume. Money and destruction. It went side by side. And yet it didn't, he knew. It could be just the opposite, and he had seen it so. Glen Lacey's Wagon Tongue with its huge, comfortable headquarters house, a house with rooms for a dozen sons who had never been born— Damn it, he was back at it again—

At the end of this canyon and over

a ridge there was a heavy stand of lodgepole pine. At the bottom of the slope was a valley. A beaver valley, lush with grass, centered by a mirror pool that reflected the broken snags of the Rockies. There was a cabin there. An old log cabin built by a trapper who had long since been outlived by the beaver tribes. Milo had stumbled onto it once when he was out riding, just trying to forget himself. It had been a painful place, for it was like another valley, a long way away and a long time back. But the pain had been the kind of pain a man needs at times, and he had camped there and he had been able to think and now he called it his own. One by one he had bought cows and turned them in there and now he had twenty.

He headed that way now, for now, if ever, he needed to think. His own soul depended on his thinking. More than that, Glen Lacey's life depended on it. For Sam Templin's long-range plans were only too clear to Milo Stuart. That was the one advantage of knowing a man well enough to forgive his faults. You could tell what he would do.

He thought of the two cow outfits that had moved into the big valley below Oro. Cockleburr outfits at best, but a beginning. Enough to show that cattle could survive the winters and grow fat on the meadow grass. Enough to bring more cattlemen, long after the gold in Oro's muddy stream was gone. And Sam Templin was a man who could see that far ahead and now, with the coming of an Oregon herd, he was ready to make his move.

He had already tried to buy the two cockleburr outfits and they had turned him down. Now he said he would try to buy Glen Lacey's trail herd, but that was talk. Sam had had his own way in Oro and he was beginning to like it too much. A strong arm could make men sell out cheap.

A hard smile tugged at the corners of Milo Stuart's lips. Yes, that was the way it was supposed to go. And he, Milo Stuart, could have half of it just by heading up that gun crew that would finally take over.

That's the way you figured it, didn't you, Sam? he thought to himself. *I could have the ranch I've always wanted and I could even the score with Glen Lacey, the only man who ever made me run. That's the way you figured it, Sam. The only trouble is I know you like a book and you don't know me at all. The only trouble is I loved you like a brother for too long a time, Sam, and you hated me from the day your folks took me in.*

The rain quit suddenly and the ridge was there ahead. He rode up through the pines and felt the clean scent of them against his face. The clouds still twisted and turned up there on the high peaks, but somewhere, beyond the ragged horizon, the sun broke through. It touched the swirling mist for a fleeting second and it was blood-red against a far glacial peak.

Chapter Four

Grass for the Taking

GLEN LACEY saw the touch of the sun against the peak and he eased his massive weight out of the saddle. He was tired. Tired from a thousand miles in the saddle; tired from sixty years of work that had gone up in dry dust; tired mostly from

a hatred he had carried for five years.

He was a big man, not so much in height or breadth, but from the way of his movements and his voice and the way he looked at things. In an older time, Glen Lacey would have been a king. Today he was a cattleman, a thousand miles from his home range, a man with a thousand cows, eighty horses, a wife, a daughter, and a crew of six—and not one foot of range he could call his own.

The camp he had made three days ago was a mile away and now, with no one to see, he let his tiredness take hold of him. He went to a pine tree and sat down, his back against the trunk. A gripping pain came and settled in the small of his back and his legs felt light, his feet had the pressure of stirrups against the arch. His skin was as brown and as crackled as the bark of the tree against which he leaned, his eyes the murky green of the needles. He wore no gloves and he opened his hands and looked at them, rope-burned, weather-stained, gnarled hands that had built a cattle empire and held a son. Both were gone.

He was a deeply religious man and as he closed his eyes, the thought that was uppermost was that somewhere he had made a mistake. He had displeased his God, and the turmoil of that thought had driven him into a hard shell encasing a coal of energy that would not let him rest. Someplace was another beginning. A man made his mistake and made his penance and someplace was tomorrow.

On the slopes around him a short thousand mixed Durham and Shorthorn cattle cropped at scant grass under the ponderosa pine. He had camped too high. He knew that. He had known it when he camped. But men

and beasts could go so far and no farther; then they would have to rest. More than that, women had to rest. His wife, with her complete silence, her complete patience, had told him that without saying anything. His daughter Margaret, whom he had never known and never could know, had taken to the saddle like a man, trying to do what she could to help. But she too had gone to the limit of her endurance and the defiance in her eyes had told him that once more she had tried to take the place of the son he had lost and once more she had failed. A terrifying loneliness shook Glen Lacey's frame and the thin cold of the high country found the marrow of his bones.

The cattle spread on the steep slope of the hill, twenty less than a thousand, and he watched them and saw them as the remnant of an empire. This was all he had. She-stuff, steers, yearlings— He thought of the long trail, that first crossing of the Snake into Idaho, the pleasant drive around Boise City and into the lush valleys of Little and Big Camas. The first calves had been born there and Margaret, with her quick laugh and her poorly concealed concern for every living thing, had been happy with their pitiful little bawling and their shaky legs.

But newborn calves couldn't keep up with a trail herd. He had knocked them in the head, one by one as they were dropped along the trail, and he had watched the growing disgust and near-hatred in his daughter's eyes. Each time a calf was born Glen Lacey himself had killed it and neck-yoked the

grieving mother to another cow to keep the herd moving. All night the bawling mother cows added their wail to the dismal complaints of the coyotes. And all night, night after night, Glen Lacey lay awake and listened. He had killed every calf with his own hands. He wouldn't ask one of his men to do a job like that.

Big Camas, Wood River, Lost River. Lava dust and more lava dust and extinct craters like pockmarks on the moon. Miles without water, with swollen tongues. Cows, heavy with calf, trying to keep up. Men with red eyes and chalk lips and two women riding silently, and the second crossing of the Snake— It was all there in the pressing tiredness in the small of his back, in the heaviness of his heart—and it all went back to the night when he had lost his only son to the quick draw of a professional gun fighter.

The hatred welled up in him and he pushed himself to his feet. Someplace there was a new beginning. Someplace he'd find a start.

He mounted his horse, a great, hulking man with white hair hacked off in uneven bunches, a man with bushy brows and a chest-length beard, a man who feared no one but God. His boots reached to just below his knees, his woolen underwear showed above the waist of his trousers. He couldn't remember when he had last shaved. He had bathed in the water of the Snake, two long months ago.

Two of his men rode out of the timber and reined up when they saw him. They were bearded and ragged and dirty, their eyes still red from those scorching days of lava dust. One of them grinned. His lip was split and a ruby drop of blood trickled down his chin.

"They're quiet, Mr. Lacey," the man said. "Maybe we'll get some sleep tonight."

"Guard as usual," Glen Lacey said. "If you've nothing else to do, cut some wood for the women." He reined his horse, a huge black, and rode toward the camp.

There were two wagons at the camp —a chuck wagon and a bed wagon, and beyond them a fire sent a spiral of smoke up through the moist needles of the conifers. Two women were at the fire and he reined up a second to watch them, Abigail, his wife, and Margaret, his daughter. He felt a welling affection for both of them and in that moment he was seeing Abigail forty years ago, twenty years old, shy, with a hidden devil in her smile. Three sons she had borne him. Two had died at birth and the third had died by a gunman's lead. And Margaret, pink and white and as useless as a pinto colt—and just as pretty.

He rode down to the camp and dismounted. "Any sight of Clete Benson?" he said. Abigail Lacey shook her head.

He unsaddled his horse and turned it loose with the remuda and then checked the wheels of the wagons.

"We'll have to move on in the morning," he said.

He saw Margaret glance at him quickly, and he thought of the little brindle bull calf that had been born last night. He hadn't killed that one. Maybe it could survive. He had seen Margaret out there looking at it. She was a girl who needed affection, but beyond that she had to give affection. She had always been that way—that was the thing that had made her believe herself in love with Milo Stuart.

The thought was bitter in Glen Lacey's mouth and he took an ax and put

it across his shoulder and strode toward a pitch-impregnated stump at the edge of the clearing. Abigail would need pitch kindling in the morning.

The ax bit into the gummy pine. As he tugged at the handle he glanced back toward the fire where Abigail, her sunbonnet tied tightly under her chin, paused to wipe smoke out of her eyes. One day, a long time ago, he had promised that woman the world. He hadn't forgotten that promise. He had only forgotten how to tell her. She was a woman in a million, that girl. A man's woman.

He tugged the ax free and swung it again and now the riders were coming into the camp. Good men, every one of them, and he had enough money to pay them off. He couldn't ask them to stay on. They were too deserving for that. He'd fire them all in a day or so. He'd have to fire them because they were too loyal to quit and he didn't have the money to keep them on. The ax pulled free.

Over at the fire Abigail Lacey blew across a ladle and tested the stew she was making. They had killed a small beef three days back and for six meals she had been able to give the men steaks. Now the weather was turning the meat and she was saving what she could by cutting up the pieces and stewing them. Inside the wagon she had a few fried steaks put down in their own grease. There was one sack of flour left, a half sack of coffee beans.

She started to get some more wood and Margaret said, "I'll get it, Mother. Why don't you sit down for a little while?"

Abigail Lacey smiled. "I'll sit when your father gets here," she said.

Two more riders came in and dismounted a hundred yards below the camp. One was tall and young and by taking a few moments at every stream crossing he had managed to keep himself at least clean. He had a growth of beard on his face, as did all the men, but it was the beard of a young man, blond, almost soft. He glanced toward the camp and Abigail tasted the juice of her stew.

"You be nice to him, now," she said to her daughter.

"Mother, will you quit trying to marry me off?" the girl said.

"Fiddlesticks," the mother said. "Terry's a nice boy."

"That doesn't mean I have to swoon every time I look at him," the girl said.

"Why not?" Abigail said, a twinkle in her eyes. "He swoons every time he looks at you."

There were small spots of color in Margaret's cheeks and as she walked toward the woodpile she brushed her blond hair into place with the back of her hand. She was a tall, willowy girl and the long dress she wore was firm across her bosoms and tight at the waist. Until a half hour ago she had been wearing a divided riding-skirt but as it neared time for Terry Crawford to ride in she had made a sudden decision to change to more feminine wear. It wasn't that she cared anything about Terry Crawford, she told herself. It was just something to do.

She watched Terry unsaddle and turn his horse loose inside the rope corral and she walked slower, not reaching the woodpile until Terry had finished. Then, without looking again in his direction, she started to load her arms with the four-foot cuts of dry aspen limbs. The voice above and behind her was pleasant.

"Can't I do that for you, Margaret?"

"Terry," she said. "You startled me."

"I know," he said. His grin was wide and honest. "I saw you waiting to be startled."

"Why, you conceited—" She bit her lip to keep from saying "ass," and then she laughed up at him. "It's just that I'm lazy and wanted someone to carry this wood for me and you seemed like a likely candidate."

"A pleasure, Ma'm," he said, making a mock bow. He reached his arms out to take the wood from her and for a moment they were close and all the humor ran out of his eyes. It always frightened her a little when she saw the deep seriousness of this man.

"Crawford!" Glen Lacey's voice was a deep-throated warning.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Lacey. I didn't see you."

"Probably not," Glen Lacey said. He tossed the armload of pitch down by the woodpile. "You're good on a horse, Crawford," he said. "My daughter is perfectly capable of packing wood. We each have our own job around here."

For a second there was rebellion in Terry Crawford's eyes and then with a quick glance at Margaret he released his hold on the wood, turned on his heel, and walked back over to where the men were standing around the rope corral. As he walked away Margaret could see that the tips of his ears were red. She didn't look at her father. She took the wood over to the fire and dropped it heavily.

"Your father's upset, dear," Abigail said, stirring busily at the big kettle.

"He was born upset," Margaret Lacey said. "Shall I call the men to supper or do you think I might have a baby, talking to them that much?"

"Margaret!"

"Sometimes I wish I had done just that. Sometimes I wish I had run away with Milo Stuart when he asked me to—"

The huge hand came from nowhere and slapped across her mouth, driving her back against the wheel of the wagon. She tasted the salt of blood from the cut inside her lip and through the sting of tears she saw her father standing there, towering over her.

Her mother's voice was so quiet as to be almost inaudible. "That's enough, Lacey," her mother said. "That's more than enough."

Glen Lacey turned and walked away, and he walked with a broken step. When he was fifty yards from camp he saw the horseman coming. It was Clete Benson.

Immediately Glen Lacey's shoulders straightened and he stood there, feet spread, his arms hanging loosely at his side. When Clete Benson was close he said, "Take care of your horse first and then tell me what you found out. You can eat later."

Clete Benson glanced once at the man he had worked for for forty years and knew Margaret and her father had had trouble again. He rode on to where the men were waiting. When he had unsaddled and turned his horse out he walked over to the bed wagon on the pretense of getting a drink. Margaret was there, staring off into space.

Clete took a dipper of water and lifted it to his lips but he didn't drink. "What this time?" he said.

"It's nothing, Clete. Please. I don't want to talk."

"Can you stand a good, stiff jolt to the jaw?"

"I guess so," she said. "I just had one."

"I saw Milo Stuart."

He saw her eyes widen, her nostrils flare, and then the color ran from her

cheeks. "That's a poor joke, Clete."

"A poorer joke than I'd make. You know that."

"Where?"

"A town called Oro. Near twenty miles from here. He's marshal there."

"Then he hasn't changed."

"I didn't ask," Clete Benson said. He saw Glen Lacey looking in their direction and he knew he had to end this fast. He gulped the water and wiped his mouth. "Did you ever think what you'd do if you ever saw him again?"

"Yes," she said, "I've thought about it." Her hands were clenched now and he could see the nails biting into the flesh. "That's why I wanted you to teach me how to shoot a pistol, Clete."

He hung the dipper back on the nail that had been driven into the bed of the wagon, and watched her walk over toward the fire, trying to read what he had seen in her eyes. He had always worshiped the girl; he had never had much use for her brother Bert. He broke off a handful of pine needles and chewed them to take the smell of whisky off his breath as he walked over to join Glen Lacey.

Lacey was standing with his arms folded across his chest, his feet spread. The long slope of the mountain was behind him, open and grassy here, running down into long corridors of dusty needles that lay like strips of beige carpet disappearing into the darkness of the shadows. Around them were the snow peaks of the never ending mountains, above them the tumbling sky.

"Well?" he said.

"There's a town called Oro," Clete Benson said. "Mining camp—"

"I sent you to find grass."

"A good-sized valley beyond the town," Clete Benson said. "Already a couple of small outfits in there but there's room left."

"Between here and there?"

"Mountains, mostly," Clete Benson said. "Gets rocky lower down; no more grass than there is here. A little warmer, less chance of sudden snow." Clete thought of Milo Stuart and of the trouble that was bound to come. "I'd say no good, Glen," he said softly. "Only sixty miles or so to the Yellowstone—"

Glen Lacey drew air deep into his lungs. His nostrils flared and his chin lifted. That was his wife over there at the fire. He had promised her the world and he hadn't forgotten. A man could go down but he could come up again, stronger than ever.

"I'll make the decisions, Clete," Glen Lacey said quietly. "There's grass around here. I mean to have some of it." He dismissed it quickly. "Find a place for camp tomorrow night?"

"There's a beaver valley about six miles below us," Clete said. "Saw it on my way down. There's a cabin there and a good stand of grass. Could hold 'em there four or five days if need be."

"All right," Glen Lacey said. "We'll move 'em at daylight." He strode off toward the fire.

Clete Benson watched him and he shook his head. He took it that Milo Stuart had some objection to cattle settling around Oro. He thought of Glen Lacey and Milo Stuart meeting face to face. *It won't be pretty*, he said to himself. *It won't be pretty at all.* He saw Margaret, busy dishing out the men's food now, and he wondered what it would do to her. He spat out the pine needles he had been chewing and walked toward the fire. Margaret looked up and he saw her eyes. They were soft and warm and mellow with old dreams.

Chapter Five

Out of the Storm

A BEAVER slapped his tail on the silver surface of the pond and chattered his teeth as Milo Stuart broke the scum ice and dipped a pail of water to do up his supper dishes.

"To hell with you," Milo said. "I'm giving you no trouble. Wait until I get a hundred head in here and then you'll have something to yammer about." He straightened, the bucket dripping, and he felt the deep cold of the evening air. "Be snowing higher up before the night's out," he said to the black nose cutting a V in the water. "Be glad you're down here in the valley."

He went back to the cabin and the cheery warmth of the fireplace came out to greet him when he opened the door. The furnishings in the cabin were meager. A bench made of half a log with dressed-down limbs pounded in for legs, a table built in a similar manner. Across the far end of the room was a built-in bunk with laced ropes serving as springs. There was no stove. He cooked over the fireplace. He hadn't been here to stay for some time and now, looking around, he was sorry he had waited so long to come back. It was like home.

He rolled that word around on his tongue, thinking back. He had always had a home. A good one. The Templins had seen to that. And yet in his mind he had never actually belonged. He had always been "the kid the Templins picked up after the Indian massacre." Not that Mr. or Mrs. Templin had ever said that. At least not in his hearing. But the feel of it was there and Sam, when they were just kids, had never been able to resist telling the story. He remembered once when the old folks had taken him and Sam to a church picnic in Baker City. The old folks had met a lot of people they hadn't seen for a long time—not good friends—just acquaintances. People had said, "And these are your two fine boys?" Mr. and Mrs. Templin would smile and say yes and how proud they were of their two boys.

But later, when all the kids had gathered to play games and the folks were talking over second pieces of pie and fourth cups of coffee Sam had made it a point to say, "Milo here ain't my real brother. He just lives with us." It always led to questions and at first Milo had been proud to be the center of the stage—the kid who escaped from a real honest-to-gosh Injun fight. But as he grew older there was less and less attraction in being singled out that way. He wanted to stand on his own. He became the best rifle shot among the twelve-year-olds.

Outside, the temperature took its first after-sundown dip and fog formed on the windows of the cabin. High above in the mountains the wind was picking up and the icy breath of its probing fingers flattened the high grass of the little valley. It was cozy here in the cabin, and a man could let his thoughts wander—

Fourteen was old enough for a kid to have his first six-gun. That's the way Milo had figured it, but old Mr. Templin had thought differently. Milo remembered how he had saved and swapped a saddle for that first Colt .44. Right from the first it had seemed to fit his hand. It was a good gun, a Richard's conversion. He didn't even tell Sam about it. It was getting so he

couldn't trust Sam and anyway Sam was two years older and he was running with a crowd of his own. Sam had a way of finding odd jobs and making money. The folks were mighty proud of Sam.

He never knew what drove him to wearing that gun into town that night. Maybe he just wanted somebody to notice him. He wore the gun to town and a drunk thought it was funny. He still remembered how much damage the barrel of a gun could do to a drunk's skull. The gun wasn't loaded and the town marshal sent him home but you couldn't keep a story like that down in a small town. Milo Stuart was a mighty tough kid, they said. The Templins deserved a lot of credit for trying to raise a kid like that. Nobody knew much about the Stuarts—just their name and the fact that they originally came from Ohio. Probably a pretty shoddy lot.

A sudden down-blast of icy wind shook the cabin. Really acting up in the high country tonight. Be plenty of snow up there by morning. He put another log on the fire and was glad he wasn't out in it. He stopped, hearing the moan of the wind, and he wondered about Glen Lacey and his cattle. They'd be all right, though. Probably in one of the thousand valleys that marked this country. Glen Lacey was enough of a cattleman to sniff the weather and not take chances. He remembered the weather back home—

Home. It never had been his own home, really, and yet he would always love the memory of Mr. and Mrs. Templin. They had died within two months of each other, and it hadn't surprised him. He could never imagine one without the other. He didn't get back for the funeral and he had always regretted that, but Sam had looked him up and told him about it. Folks hadn't been wrong about Sam. Sam had done very well in some sort of mining operation up above Lewiston.

It was good seeing Sam. Milo had never realized before just how much attachment he had formed for the man. They got drunk and they took a couple of dance-hall girls out. Sam was free with his money. Nothing was too good for Milo. "I've missed you, kid," Sam said.

It was a wonderful feeling, having Sam there, knowing you belonged to something. But after Sam left there was that terrific let-down, the feeling of inadequacy and failure. Only two years' difference in their ages and Sam was making money hand over fist while Milo didn't have a dime.

The weather was raising hell in the high country now. It could really blow up there, whipping snow so a man couldn't see two feet in front of his face. It always seemed to howl over the top of the little valley, giving a man a feeling of security. The pond would freeze over and the grass would be stiff with frost but the snow that fell here would be wet and it wouldn't last. Not this early in the season. The wind pushed smoke down the chimney and puffed it into the room.

Milo decided to make himself another pot of coffee. He wouldn't sleep tonight, he knew. He had been waiting too long to be alone like this, just thinking back and putting pieces together. He wanted to taste it slowly now, enjoying parts of it, bitterly hating other parts. He remembered Margaret Lacey.

There was such a thing as love at first sight, he knew. He had experienced it. He was deputy town marshal then and she was the daughter of the

most successful cattleman in that part of the country. They were as far apart as the two poles. But it wasn't an accident, bumping into her in front of the general store that day. She wanted it to seem like an accident and he let it seem that way but the way he prolonged the apologies and the way she let him prolong them— The grin of remembering went out of his eyes. That was the first time he had ever met Bert Lacey.

Nothing would have come of it, maybe, if it hadn't been for that night at the dance when he had found himself alone with the moon and the girl and a kiss on his lips and her pouring out her heart. She was lonesome. Just as lonesome as he had ever been in his life. She was an extra in the household just as surely as he had been an extra. They were like young children talking of playing house. They would have a place of their own. A little place with a little cabin and when the children came they would add the rooms— It hurt to remember some of it.

Out in the little valley a cow complained about the weather and Milo's horse dug impatiently at the fast freezing ground in front of the little shed that served as a barn. The other place had been something like this, fifty cows, the beginning of a herd, and there had been ten horses, all good stock. A man had to work hard to get money enough for that. A man had to be tough and let nothing get in his way when he was trying to boost himself from deputy to chief. He had done it and he had made enemies. That, he was beginning to learn, had been part of his job, that making of enemies. But a man had to be tough and he had to be good. So good that no one ever would draw a gun on him. The few moments he and Margaret could steal for themselves she used to spend worrying about that gun and its danger.

"Don't worry," he told her. "Your future husband will be so good nobody will try anything." The confidence of youth.

A fine theory, but it didn't work. There was a kid around town, a tough kid. His name was Charley Bixter. He gambled a lot and he drank a lot and he liked to fight. Milo could help him with the last and he did. He thought maybe that would be the end of it, but it wasn't. Charley Bixter had a lot of friends. One of them was Bert Lacey.

The water in the pot was boiling and as Milo lifted up the lid and peered down into the dark water it was like looking into his own soul. All that turning and boiling and roiling and twisting— He wished suddenly he had never come here. It was hell to be alone. He wondered if anyone else had ever seen a dead man's eyes in a fire.

There was a moaning sound that came to the valley when the storms were fierce enough in the high country. It came about midnight that night, a wailing, distant sound as if the mountains themselves were lamenting the passing of summer. It was snowing outside—huge, wet flakes that plastered against the side of the cabin. There'd even be snow in the pass between here and town, he decided. He was sorry that he hadn't laid in a few supplies.

But the truth of the matter was that he hadn't known for sure where he was going when he left Sam and Lily there in town this afternoon. He had only known that Sam had reached the danger point in his ambition. Side Sam with a gun now and let him win and there would be no stopping him. After that Sam would always need a gun.

Milo had known that and he had known that he would never fight Glen Lacey. He couldn't give Glen Lacey's son back to him but he could refuse to fight, he could do what he could. He hadn't wanted to kill Bert Lacey. The thought of it was a tormenting hell.

He had been baited into that fight with Charley Bixter and Bert Lacey. Charley and Bert were both drunk. They wore guns into town and Milo took them away from them. They bought another pair of guns and they shot up the main street. There was little a man could do when they came at you from both sides. He tried his best to make it a crippling shot. But the light was bad and time was against him.

He tried to tell Margaret how it happened. It was no good. The next day Glen Lacey came after him with a gun and Milo Stuart ran. He didn't want to hurt Margaret again, not with another killing. He couldn't stand that. He sold out for a third of what his place was worth.

Running. It seemed to him that he had been running ever since. He went to Sam because Sam had been telling him for months that he needed him. He figured he'd forget. He was young yet, and tough. But he found that once you run it's hard to quit because he was running from shadows and from the past and from the curse of the only trade he knew. Gun-fighting. The fire died down and the coals winked at him and accused him and tortured him.

Once, toward morning, the wind shifted, blowing straight down from the higher elevations. It brought the snow, a smothering white swirl of it, and it brought a sound that was like the combined voice of a herd of cattle, cattle that were bewildered and frozen and lost in the smother of white blindness. It was only the wind, he told himself, but the sound came again and this time he opened the door and listened.

The wind had shifted and the sound was gone. The air outside was ice—near zero, he figured, and dropping. This wasn't a passing storm up there. It was the first blast of the winter blizzards that blew down from the glaciers and sent the mercury skidding to forty below in all but the sheltered valleys. Two hours yet until daylight, and then it would be a gray daylight with only the white of the snow to reflect it and the mountains would be gone, lost in the swirling gray-white mists of the blizzard. He built the fire higher and made more coffee. No sense in sleeping now.

While the coffee was making he put on his sheepskin-lined mackinaw and wrapped a scarf around his head and groped his way out to the shed. The horse and some of his cows were there, huddled together for warmth. There was a little meadow hay in the mow—not much. The stock could still graze in the valley. The snow wasn't deep enough to prevent that. But as soon as it melted off he'd have to cut some grass.

Funny, he thought, how a man will make his plans just as if he has already decided what to do. He hadn't decided. He kept telling himself that. His first thought had been to try to warn Glen Lacey against moving into the big valley beyond Oro. He would do that, then he would sell these few cows to Tommy Walker, who was starting a herd, and he would be on his way—Idaho, California, maybe Nevada. Those were his plans, as far as he had gone with them. But now, standing

here, thinking of the hay he would need, he knew that those were not his plans at all and they never had been. He was going to stay here. He was tired of running.

He went back to the cabin and for a long time he sat and held his face in his hands and his eyes burned from lack of sleep and his mind teemed with a thousand thoughts. He knew that someday, soon, he would have to face Glen Lacey. Maybe that was the real reason he was staying. He would have to stand and face this man and face Margaret or he would have to run forever.

The world turned gray and that was the morning. Around the edge of the little valley the pines were heavy with wet snow and behind them the pale-gray mist was a ghost shroud hiding the forest. The peaks were hidden by the leaden cloud masses that swirled and tumbled into the gray bleakness of nothing and the moaning wail of the high wind floated down into the valley like a cry of distress. There in the valley two inches of wet snow bent the grass and heightened the color of the red willows around the pond. The pond itself was virgin-white, its surface interrupted only by the mark of a rabbit track. The cows and the horse looked out on a changed world with calculating eyes and pawed at the

snow. The heavy grass, relieved of its load, sprang upright. The cattle and the horse started a day of eating.

Milo Stuart put on his heavy coat and poured what water there was into an old kettle, then taking a hand ax he went outside, walking with close, shuffling steps, marking a path in the shallow snow the way he had done when he was a kid. The smoke from his fire lay along the ground and teased his nostrils and he thought of the scant supply of food in the cabin. Canned goods, mostly. Tomatoes and peaches for breakfast, he told himself, then a trip to town. Might as well face it and get it over with. Sam wouldn't like it, but it was for Sam's own good.

He glanced out toward the pond and stopped in his tracks. A big doe was walking down toward the pond, her spindly legs lifting daintily.

The slight wind was blowing directly off the pond now and the doe, used to the cabin and the cattle, was paying little attention. Milo set the pail and ax down carefully and started backing toward the house, his eyes never leaving the deer. The doe pawed experimentally at the white surface of the pond and then started working around through the willows to where the tiny trickle of the spring fed in. Milo got his gun belt and strapped it around his middle, outside the coat.

He went back outside, walking carefully now, measuring the distance with his eyes. He had lost sight of the doe but he knew she was there in the willows. Cautiously he walked on toward the pond.

He was no more than a hundred and fifty feet away when the doe snorted and sprang straight up. He shot fast, knew he had hit her, then shot again. The second shot caught the doe in the

air and she fell heavily and didn't move. He holstered his gun and ran toward the deer, fumbling in his pocket for his knife. A shot shattered the air behind him.

At first he thought it was the echo of his own gun and immediately he knew that was impossible. He waited for a long time, his heart pounding slowly, and then drawing his gun, he fired three times in rapid succession. The echoes died and on their heels came three cracks from a rifle.

The sound came from up the slope in the direction of the high pass that led across from the valley to the west. Someone was up there, lost in that swirl of snow and maze of pines. He ran toward the shed, reloading his gun as he ran. Snatching up a halter, he headed slowly across the valley toward where his horse was grazing. The horse, startled by the shots, lifted heels and tail and lit out on a dead run. Milo circled, coaxing, holding the halter behind him and the horse stood, his nostrils flared, his eyes rolling suspiciously. Once more he ran and once more Milo circled and then he caught him and led him back to the shed.

He rode to the edge of the valley where the pines started and cupping his hands around his mouth, he yelled out. A faint answer floated down toward him out of the gray swirl a hundred yards up the slope. He drew his gun and fired once. The signal gun answered from near by.

He rode into the timber then, up the rocky slope and in a matter of minutes he was into the snowstorm. It swirled out at him suddenly, sucking him in, blinding him. He called, again and again, and got an answer and then he stopped and listened. He could hear the grind of wagon wheels against rocks.

They came into sight suddenly, a snow-encrusted team pulling what appeared to be a chuck wagon. A bundled figure sat huddled on the seat and there was a rifle leaning against the figure's knee. Immediately behind the first rig was a second wagon, drawn by four horses. The wind shifted and the bawl of cattle was undeniably clear.

Milo's horse nickered and the lead team lifted tired heads and swung that way of their own accord. Milo pushed his horse forward, calling out now.

"Haven't you got more sense than to be up on the pass in this kind of weather? Lucky I took a shot at a deer—"

There was no answer from the figure on the seat. The team plodded down the slope, straight toward the valley and safety, and the second outfit followed along in the tracks of the first. Milo rode close to the rig and the breath went out of him and his muscles stiffened. There were strands of long, blond hair escaping from under the heavy woolen shawl wrapped around the driver's head and face. The hands that gripped the lines were small and the foot that rode the brake was small—

Fifty yards up the slope, coming out of the smother of snow, the heads of cattle began to appear and riding point was a familiar figure, bundled in great coat, smothered in scarves.

"We're all right now, Mrs. Lacey," Clete Benson shouted. "That's the valley I was telling you about—"

The figure on the seat of the first wagon stirred. The voice was muffled, but he would have known it anywhere. "Thank God you found us," the voice said, and then it stopped. The eyes went wide.

"Margaret," Milo Stuart said. His voice was a hard, sour lump and it froze there in his throat.

Chapter Six

"I'll Be Tough."

THERE was no decision to be made. The cattle came out of the timber, pressing against the wagons, forcing them to move, and the only way to move was down into the valley. Clete Benson rodè his horse between Milo and the wagon and gave the orders.

"There's a cabin down there and a fire," he said, and it was his answer to any argument. He swung a rope end and stung the rumps of Margaret's team and they lunged into the harness.

Once Margaret Lacey let her mittened hand drop to the rifle at her knee and then she was busy with the team, working the lines with the stiff, automaton movements of half-frozen muscles. The herd picked up speed and now they pushed down toward the valley in a solid wedge, their breaths a cloud of steam. The shouting of the men lifted above the crunch of hoofs and the clacking of horns. They were into the floor of the valley now, starting to spread, and Milo Stuart was working the cattle along with the others. A young rider, a handsome young man with a blond beard, rode close and shot Milo a grin.

"This will be hell on your feed, stranger," the rider said, "but Glen Lacey will make it right with you." He spurred his horse and rode back toward the drag.

The wind had died and the thick smoke of the cabin fire stood straight in the air. Milo rode toward the chuck wagon and, reaching out, he gripped the bridle of the off horse and led the team toward the shack. The bed wagon, driven by Abigail Lacey, followed close behind.

He dismounted quickly and reached up to help Margaret from the seat. She lashed at him with the loose ends of the lines and tried to get down by herself. She stumbled and he caught her in his arms. A million memories raced through him and then she was pushing against him, pulling herself free, and she stumbled back toward the bed wagon.

Abigail Lacey sat in the seat, her gaze straight ahead, her hands gripping the lines, her eyes fixed. There was frost on the scarf that covered her mouth. Clete Benson slid his horse to a stop in a smother of snow.

"I'll handle it," he said softly.

It was Clete and Margaret who got Abigail Lacey into the cabin, Milo Stuart who pulled blankets from the bed. Clete went out to the bed wagon and came back with a couple of bundles.

"You women get into dry clothes," he said tightly. He dropped the bundles on the floor and motioned Milo outside. When he had closed the door he met the younger man's eyes.

"This won't work, Stuart," he said flatly. "Somebody's got to move along and those women can't. You better be gittin'."

The muscles along Milo's jaw were tight. "I live here, Clete," he said quietly. "I'll be the one who has the ideas and gives the orders."

"You're asking for trouble, Stuart."

Milo shook his head. "The women can have the cabin. Us men can sleep

in the shed yonder. I got a venison out here. I'm willing to divvy it up. Tell your men to leave me alone. I'll tell Glen Lacey myself."

He turned abruptly and walked to where he had left the deer. He skinned out the carcass on the spot and was wiping off the knife blade when he heard the rider coming toward him. It was the young man with the blond beard and there was trouble in the young man's eyes. He dismounted easily. He was wearing a sheepskin-lined coat and now he unbuttoned it and there was a gun belted around his middle.

"I hear you're Milo Stuart," he said evenly.

"I've never denied it," Milo said.

"You don't know me," the stranger said. "Name's Terry Crawford. I think a lot of Margaret Lacey."

So that was it. A man with stars in his eyes meeting a rival who was only a name to him. "You better go get warm, Crawford," Milo said. "You've had a tough drive."

"I've heard a lot about you, Stuart," Terry Crawford said. "None of it was good."

He was game, this Crawford. He felt he had an ax to grind and he wasn't going to waste time.

"You figure killing me will put you in good with the old man?" Milo said. He was watching Terry's hand, waiting for it to move. Terry was bone-tired and chilled through. A man wasn't his fastest at a time like that. Maybe there would be time to lunge in and grip that arm before it could raise. "Or do you just want to see what it feels like to get a slug of lead in the guts?"

"Sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Damn sure," Milo said.

"Crawford!" Clete Benson's voice lashed out at them, a startled voice, high and wild above the bawl of the cattle. For just a split second Terry Crawford's head turned, and Milo Stuart threw himself. His shoulder butted Crawford in the chest, knocking the lighter man off his feet. Milo's fist lashed out and cracked against Crawford's jaw and then he had the gun out of Crawford's holster and he threw it over his shoulder onto the surface of the pond.

Milo got to his feet immediately, releasing his man, and he stood back, his breath coming hard, the steam of it jetting from his nostrils. Crawford, half dazed, lumbered to his feet and at that moment Clete Benson was between them. Benson had a gun in his hand and he jammed the barrel of it deep into Milo's stomach.

"Damn you, Stuart," he said, "I've a notion to pull the trigger now and get it over with."

"I wouldn't, Clete," Milo said softly. He was standing there, his hands waist-high. With a fierce suddenness his left hand chopped down, catching Clete Benson's right wrist. At the same time his right hand caught the barrel of Benson's six-shooter and twisted it aside and up. The veins stood out on the old man's forehead and slowly his fingers relaxed. Milo held the gun by the barrel and offered it, butt-first.

"Keep it out of my belly, Clete," he said. "And if either one of you make another move it had better be while I'm not looking." He started to walk away. "Pack in that meat if you expect to eat today."

The last of the cattle were in the valley. They spread out in every direction and still there was not enough space for them. Milo's twenty head

were lost in the herd and already the stand of grass was trampled and fouled.

The valley would support a herd this size for three or four days, no longer. And then what? Over the ridge and down into the main valley where Sam Templin had already made his decision to take over? Milo cursed softly under his breath.

The Wagon Tongue hands, four of them, had left the cows and now they were heading in for the cabin. Milo watched them, looking for Glen Lacey, feeling an old stirring resentment and anger. The thing to do was stop Lacey before he had a chance to move—jam a gun into his ribs and make him listen. There was no other way. He thought of Margaret and now he could remember that she had turned against him as swiftly as her father had turned against him.

All right, he thought. *You want me to be tough, I'll be tough—*

The men had dismounted over by the shed, their movements stiff with the chill that was in them. Clete Benson and Terry Crawford came in, packing the deer, and one of the men walked out to meet them.

"The Old Man in the house?" the rider said. "We got a rough tally—"

"Thought he was with you."

"Hell, I ain't seen him in two hours," the rider said. "Him and young Crawford took off down a draw to see if there was anything down there—"

Terry Crawford dropped the hind quarters of the deer. "He rode back to join you fellows. Sent me on ahead to give Clete a hand."

A silence that could be felt dropped over the crew. It reached out and touched Milo Stuart, the silence of disaster. One of the horses in the valley lifted his head and pointed his ears toward the timbered slopes and nickered a welcome. A riderless horse came into the valley at a crablike trot, tossing its head against loose reins that had been broken off short. The saddle was twisted until it was ready to slip under the animal's belly. There were great gouges in the leather and blood was running from a cut on the gelding's hip.

Clete Benson's voice was a whisper: "My God, it's the Old Man's horse—"

The four riders who had remained to work the last of the cattle down into the valley were blue with cold. One of them had the saddle off his horse and he was standing there, holding it in his hand. He didn't say a word. He put the saddle back on and started to cinch up. They didn't even notice Milo Stuart when he walked up.

"No use of all of us going," Milo said.

They whirled and stared at him, these men who had known him a long time back. The recognition and the remembering was in their eyes.

"I reckon you'd like to go alone, wouldn't you, Stuart?" It was Terry Crawford and his meaning was clear.

A bruise was beginning to form on the side of Terry's face. He had recovered his gun and it was in its holster. He met Milo's eyes and held them.

"You want to go with me?" Milo said.

"I'll run this show," Clete Benson said hotly. "I'm foreman of this outfit."

"There's three four pairs of good gloves in the cabin," Milo said. "We'll need some blankets. There's a pint of whisky in my saddlebag."

Clete made no acknowledgment of the suggestions. "Rip, Fenton," he said to two of the men, "stay here and help the women any way you can. Don't tell 'em nothin' about this. Listen

for three shots. We'll fire 'em if we need you. Tell the women we're out with the Old Man takin' a count of the herd." He spat across the center of his lips. "Boles and Nizic, you get yourselves thawed out and trail about a half hour behind us." He glanced toward the mountains.

"You better rest up, Clete," Milo said.

"I'll ask you when I want an opinion," Clete said. "You know that mountain?" Milo nodded. "Then you're goin' with us."

"I planned on it," Milo said. He took a catch rope and walked out toward where the Wagon Tongue remuda was bunched. He took the first horse he came to—a red roan—and led it back to the shed. In a matter of minutes he was saddled. He walked over to the cabin then and knocked on the door. Margaret's voice told him to come in.

He entered the cabin and saw that Mrs. Lacey had been put to bed. The men's clothes the women had been wearing were steaming in front of the fireplace. Margaret had put on a dress and she was standing with her back to the fire, her hands spread behind her. She caught her breath when she saw that it was Milo and then she turned, facing the fire, her back to him.

"I didn't plan this," he said. He shrugged out of his coat and took an old jumper that hung on a nail. He put this on and then put his mackinaw on over that. There was a pair of gloves on a shelf along with some canned goods. He took the gloves and walked over to the fire and warmed them. The girl turned again so she would not have to face him.

"You can't get rid of me just by pretending I'm not here," he said. "This is where I live."

"Don't talk to me," she said. "Just don't say anything."

"I shot a deer this morning," he said. "It's outside. You better get the men to cut it up. They look hungry."

He pulled the gloves on and went outside, closing the door behind him. The memory of her standing there in front of the fire wouldn't leave his mind. His fire. His house. And they used to talk about how they would sit in front of their own fire.

Clete Benson met him in front of the shed. "You get them blankets and gloves?"

"I told you where they were," Milo Stuart said. "Get 'em yourself. You're running this show."

Clete's hand gripped Milo's arm. "Look, Stuart," he said evenly. "Maybe you'd as soon not go this trip."

"That's right," Milo said, slapping the hand away. "I'd as soon not. But if you and Crawford go up there alone you'll get yourself lost and I'll have to come after the whole damn pack of you. I'm going because the sooner I get you all together the sooner I can kick you the hell out of here. Are you gonna get those blankets and gloves or not?"

"You're a pleasant bastard, Stuart," Clete Benson said. He strode off toward the cabin.

Milo got his horse and mounted and rode close to Terry Crawford. "You're being a damn fool, Crawford," he said. "I don't want any trouble with you."

Terry Crawford turned his coat collar around his face and rode over to the cabin, leading Clete Benson's horse and an extra saddled animal. Clete came out of the cabin with the extra gloves and the blankets. For a moment he stood there, staring at Milo Stuart. He knew now why Milo hadn't brought

the extra gear from the cabin. It would have meant questions from the women. It would have meant explaining and being trapped into confessing the truth.

The door opened and Margaret Lacey was standing there. She used Clete's name but she was looking at Terry Crawford.

"Please find him, Clete," she said. "I think it would kill Mother if anything happened to Dad."

"Don't worry, Margaret," Terry Crawford said. That was all he said but there was a world of promise in the softness of his voice.

The lump of memory was bitter in Milo's throat. "We gonna talk until dark and then start out?" he said.

The three horsemen rode away from the cabin and the girl stood in the door and watched them go and deep inside her she knew she felt better because Milo Stuart was going along. She closed the door and went and smoothed the covers around her mother's face.

Chapter Seven

"We're Never Whipped."

BY THE time they were a mile from the cabin they found the wind. The snow here was powder-dry and it swirled up around the hoofs of the horses and floated in white nothingness before the men's eyes. The cattle trail which had been so plain was visible now only in short stretches where the drift had failed to cover.

Terry Crawford rode with a stubbornness that Milo could not help but admire. The man had been in the saddle six or eight hours, at least, most of that time in the confusion of the sudden blizzard that had swept off the peaks, driving Glen Lacey and his herd down the mountain. He rode erect, his eyes searching every possible landmark. Clete Benson, on the other hand, was an older man and the strain was beginning to tell.

It had stopped snowing and there was only the powder drift but in the open spaces between the pines this became a blinding curtain and the wind cut through clothes like a knife. There was a gloomy grayness that told of the storm still raging around the higher peaks.

Clete Benson's thin voice came in with the wind. "We better walk awhile."

They dismounted together, leading their horses, grateful for the warm flow of circulation through their legs and feet. Every tree looked exactly like the next one and the rocks were all alike. Clete shook his head.

"Not much use, I reckon," he said. "The way I see it his horse fell with him and he maybe broke a leg. If we did find him he'd be froze—"

"He's tougher than that," Milo said.

They went on and up and at times the wind died completely and the warmth from their own bodies came up from the collars of their clothes and bathed the lower halves of their faces.

"We rode down a draw," Terry Crawford said. "We cut right away from the main herd and hit this draw—"

"Chokecherry Creek," Milo Stuart said. "We're getting too far north." He mounted his horse and started angling to the left through the timber. In a little while he knew the other two men were following him.

The wind picked up again and now

they were in heavy timber and the snow swirled in ever-increasing devil twists. The timber became thicker and the drifts deeper and now at times the horses sank to their bellies. Milo heard Crawford's voice.

"You sure you know what you're doing, Stuart?"

"You got a better idea?"

"We didn't drive through timber like this."

"You lead the way, then," Milo said. He kept riding, straight into the timber. *It must be Chokecherry,* he thought to himself. *We can save a mile cutting through here—*

He rode carefully now, holding his horse in and in time he dismounted, motioning the others to stay back. He groped his way forward on foot until at last he found what he was seeking—a cliff with a sheer drop of a hundred feet or more. Down in the canyon the snow blew in a fine, thin stream and he could look down and see the brush that grew along the creek. He heard Terry Crawford's sharp intake of breath just over his shoulder.

"My God," Crawford said. "If he fell over that—"

"What makes you think he'd fall over that without his horse falling with him?" Milo said. He mounted and turned to the right again, following the lip of the canyon upward.

At the head of the canyon it started to snow, coming on a slant through the sparse timber. Immediately ahead of them the canyon funneled out of a draw timbered only by altitude-stunted pines.

"This is it," Crawford called excitedly. "The herd was about half a mile upslope from here—"

"Stay put right here, Clete," Milo said. "Crawford can take one side and I'll take the other. We'll work up to where the herd crossed and then work the bottom of the draw together."

Clete Benson only nodded his head. He was hunched deep in his saddle, his shoulders slumped forward. Milo reached back and worked on the buckle of his saddlebag with his heavily gloved hand. In time he got it open and he found the bottle. He handed it across to Benson without a word. The old man took it and then shook his head.

"Better save it in case we find Lacey," he said.

"All right," Milo said. "Get a fire going if you can." He doubted that Benson could but he wanted the man on the ground, moving around. "Let's go, Crawford," he said. "You take this side, I'll cross over."

Terry Crawford didn't argue. He spurred his horse and was soon lost in the smother kicked up by the horse's hoofs.

A thousand thoughts crossed Milo Stuart's mind as he worked through that smother of snow alone. Suppose Glen Lacey was dead? What of it? It might be a blessing. Margaret and Mrs. Lacey wouldn't try to go into the cattle business on their own. They would sell the herd to the first buyer and that would be Sam Templin.

The snow stung his eyes and he thought of that night in the little cattle town in Oregon when he had whirled and fired at Bert Lacey, trying for a crippling shot. He thought of Margaret and of Mrs. Lacey and he prayed to God that this time he could give them a life instead of taking one from them.

He reined his horse into the wind and rode closer to the bottom of the draw. There was brush here. He dismounted and led his horse and he

worked his way along carefully.

That broken saddle. That meant rocks and there were rocks a few hundred yards higher up where the stream ran through a willow thicket. He kicked snow from a bush and made a clumsy knot in the reins and walked on, kicking at the brush, listening to the soft thud of the snow pack falling into snow.

His foot struck something and he nearly fell. At first he thought it was a rock and he kicked at it and then he was on his knees, pawing at the snow. His gloved hand touched the cedar butt and he tugged on it and saw the nickle plate. A six-shooter— He dropped it into the pocket of his coat and now the excitement was forcing the blood through his veins. This could be where the horse fell. Round mounds in the snow showed him the jagged boulders that lined the creek. He kept pushing on through the brush and now he started to circle back, wanting to cover every square inch of ground.

At first it was only a trick of the wind and then it was words and Milo Stuart stood with his hand on a rock, his foot lifted for a toehold in a snow bank. It was a human voice, coming from directly above him. A strong voice, talking, reasoning.

"Have your fling, Bert," the voice was saying. "Sow your oats and get it out of your system. You're all I got, Bert, and I expect a lot of you. If you're wild, Bert, you're no wilder than I was when I was your age. You'll settle down, Bert, and you and me will build this thing up together. Lacey and son—" The voice trailed off and there was a heavy, crushing sound in the snow.

"Can't spare the cattle—" The voice was broken now. "If there's cows in that draw I got to have 'em. Promised her the world and all I got is my cows—"

There was a low moan, a thrashing sound. Milo pulled himself up the bank and Glen Lacey was there in the snow.

From the looks of the tracks the man had been wandering around in a tight circle, possibly even on hands and knees, but that had kept him alive. He was stretched out in the packed snow now, his left hand working, his right arm twisted completely around. Milo dropped to his knees and turned him over.

"Lacey," he said. "Lacey!"

The big man's eyes opened and after five years Milo Stuart and Glen Lacey were face to face. Milo looked at the man and met the eyes and he saw a soft smile twist the lips and there was affection in the eyes.

"Glad you come along, Bert," the man on the ground said. "I was havin' a rough time—"

The smile was gone and consciousness was gone. Milo took Glen Lacey's pistol from his pocket and fired three times.

It took all three men to pack Glen Lacey out of there. His shoulder or his arm or both were badly broken and his arm kept swinging around. Twice, for fleeting seconds, Lacey regained consciousness and once they were able to force whisky down his throat. When they were back to the horses they rubbed his left arm and his legs and tried to slap circulation into his face and later they wrapped him in blankets and got him into a saddle with Crawford riding behind to hold him.

Milo held up the pint bottle and shook it. It was two-thirds full. "The old man can't use it," he said, "we

might as well." He passed the bottle to Terry, who drank a third of it and passed it along to Clete.

"Drinkin' with you is gettin' to be a habit," Clete Benson said. He lifted the bottle. "Here's to you."

They met Boles and Nizic within a half hour and the two men, thawed out by the heat of the cabin and with coffee, took over, Nizic changing places with Terry Crawford, Boles riding on ahead, leading the way. When they got back to the cabin Clete Benson had to be helped down.

There was a flurry of excitement as the men lowered Glen Lacey and packed him toward the house and Margaret was there, holding the door. Milo followed the others in and now the sting of heat was against his face and racing through him and they were placing Glen Lacey on the bunk and Mrs. Lacey was crying softly. Dimly he saw Margaret lay her head on Terry Crawford's chest and he saw Terry's arm go around her, holding her close.

"It was Stuart here who found him," Clete Benson said. He was sitting on the bench, huddled over, a cup of coffee cradled in his hands.

The big man on the bunk stirred. "Is Bert here?" he said clearly.

There was a sharp intake of breath and Margaret pushed herself away from Terry Crawford.

"Come here a minute, Bert," Glen Lacey said.

Abigail Lacey was kneeling by the bunk. She looked up and her eyes met the eyes of Milo Stuart.

"He thought it was Bert found him," Milo said. His mouth was dry as cotton.

"You'd better talk to him, then," Mrs. Lacey said softly.

"Bert? Where are you, Bert?"

Glen Lacey was lying on his back, his broken arm propped up on pillows. Already the hand had started to swell and the fingers, where the glove had been torn away, were puffed and greenish-black. His eyes were closed and his white beard lay out on top of the covers. "I want to tell you what we got to do, Bert—"

Milo Stuart walked over and knelt down by the bunk.

"We're never whipped, you understand?" Glen Lacey said. "A Lacey is never whipped. Can you hear me, Bert?"

"I hear you," Milo said.

"It broke bad for us. Lost every acre I had. Had to sell off half my herd."

"You better sleep now."

"But we ain't whipped, Bert. Not you and me." Margaret was crying softly and Mrs. Lacey was standing there, staring down at her husband and at the man who had killed her son. "There's land in Montana," Glen Lacey said. "Plenty of land. Oregon cows do good in Montana—"

"Sure," Milo said. "Everything will be fine."

"Don't sell our cows," the old man said. "Keep the herd and watch it grow. We sell our cows, we're whipped—"

He started to cough, a dry, hacking cough at first, then deep down in his chest. His eyes flickered open and for a second he was conscious and the pain in his arm reached through the film of his mind. He gritted his teeth and tried to sit up and Milo pressed him back against the bed.

Milo stood up and none of the men would meet his gaze. "I'll ride to town and get some help," he said. "I know a girl that's good at nursing." He turned up his coat collar and started

toward the door. Clete Benson stopped him.

"A half hour or so won't make much difference," Clete Benson said. "You get thawed out."

One of the men moved the bench closer to the fire and Milo sat down. He sat there, rubbing his hands together, staring into the coals. There was nothing to say to anyone.

Once he closed his eyes and when he opened them there was a cup of coffee being held out to him. He looked up and Abigail Lacey was standing there. Her eyes were still bewildered but her chin was firm and her voice was controlled.

"Drink this, Milo," she said softly. "It will be good for you."

Chapter Eight

Benevolent Tyrant

LILY DEVORE, her cheeks as red as apples, looked at the frozen morning and liked it. The streets that had been mud a day before were now jagged ice fingers and the frost crunched underfoot. The ground would freeze deep soon and the flumes would freeze and then there would be nothing for the men to do except drink and gamble, and both meant money to Lily Devore. She walked rapidly toward the Golden Lily, feeling the bite of the clean air in her nostrils, knowing that the tip of her nose was turning red. There was a beaver fur wrapped tightly around her throat and it hid the lavalier with the two-carat diamond that Sam Templin had given her.

She hadn't meant to take that from Sam. She hadn't meant to take anything from him except that which she earned. With Lily business was business and there was no place for sentiment or love in her life. Her parents had been in love with one another and they had starved to death. She walked faster, her heels clicking against the board walk. To look at her no one would have suspected that she had lain awake half the night crying.

Pete Svenson was just opening his boot shop and she stopped a moment to talk to him, asking him if he had heard anything about the slippers she had ordered from Chicago. He hadn't, but he was so obviously pleased with her company that she stayed awhile, talking of the weather, the grade of ore from the two hard-rock mines, the size of the latest nugget found in the creek. After she left, Pete Svenson stood there watching her, his eyes a bit brighter, and when he went to work that morning he was whistling.

She loved this walk into town every morning—although she seldom made it this early. There was a good hotel in Oro and she could have easily enough built herself a nice apartment over the Golden Lily, but she had by-passed both and taken a room with the Spencers out at the edge of town. Tim Spencer was a ne'er-do-well handy man, his wife Laura a florid, round woman with eight children and another on the way. It was the least likely place in town for a woman to take a room, but Lily liked it there. She had paid for rebuilding the house so that there would be plenty of room for all.

A man hailed her from across the street. "Emil!" she said. "I've been wanting to talk to you." She lifted her skirts and started across and the man waved her back.

"Let me come over there, Lily. You'll ruin your shoes." He hustled across the street, a round, red-faced man. "You sure look purty this morning, Lily," he said.

"Ah, ah, Emil," she said, wagging a finger at him. "I'll tell your wife you've been flirting with me."

"And if you did," Emil said, "she'd say she didn't blame me none." The grin left his face and he ducked his head. "Things are goin' pretty slow out at the mill," he said. "But I hope I'll be able to start payin' something on that loan pretty soon now."

"Whenever you can, Emil," she said. "How's Susie?"

"Fine," Emil said. "She was sittin' up all day yesterday and she eats like a mucker." He lowered his head again. "Lily, that girl would of died if it wasn't for you—"

"Fiddlesticks," Lily said. "Get on to work before you get fired." She shoved him and went on down the street and he stood there looking at her.

A good man, Emil, she thought. He'd pay back the loan she had made him. She liked to think that she judged a man pretty closely before she made him a loan. That was one thing she could really do. Judge men. She didn't realize her step had quickened and her lips had tightened. When she passed the marshal's office she set her teeth and said, *Damn, damn, damn,* under her breath.

It was too early for the girls to be up so she walked on through the town, pausing to look into the windows of the hardware store, waving to the young clerk who was sweeping up prior to opening. The clerk came to the window and asked her if she wanted anything, forming the words with his lips, exaggerating. She shook her head and smiled at him and walked on.

At the edge of the town she could look up the canyon and see the peaks. They were shrouded with tossing gray masses and she knew it was snowing up there. She could feel it in the wind. Down along the creek she saw the long toms, the sluice boxes, and the little mounds of gravel. Gold, she thought. Gold for Lily Devore. She went down the trail that led to the creek.

Only ten percent of the town's population was women and that ten percent was divided sharply into two parts—the wives and the girls. And Lily Devore. She was neither, and she enjoyed her position. She had a dozen girls working for her but they were entertainers, nothing more. What they did after they were through work was none of Lily's business and she never interfered with them, but during working-hours they were as rigidly supervised as if they had been in a private girls' school.

She had used up nearly an hour and now as she turned to go back she noticed an abandoned claim and just beyond it another. She bit her lip, worrying about it. She knew that Oro had been a freak strike with none of the permanence of some of the bigger strikes. Oro had been running two years now and some said it was about at the end of the rope. She didn't believe it but at the same time it worried her.

A milk cow tied in back of one of the cabins made her think of Sam's long-range plan of going into the cattle business. It sounded smart and she was all in favor of it, but there were strings attached. Sam wanted her to go along with him, as his wife. She thought of

Milo Stuart and she kicked a small rock with her toe, hard.

The town was stirring when she got back on the flat and a dozen men spoke to her, tipping their hats. Half of those men owed her money. She thought about that and wondered if perhaps she shouldn't start collecting, just in case some more of the claims petered out.

She turned in at the hotel and the big dining-room was a welter of noise and the smell of frying potatoes and steak and bacon and ham was thick in the air. She had worked up a healthy appetite and she stood there sniffing.

"Petey," she said to the clerk, "I could eat a horse."

"Fresh out of horse, Lily," the clerk said. "Will venison do?"

"Knock the horns off for me, will you, Petey?" she said.

She went into the dining-room and walked slowly, enjoying the boisterous greetings, pausing to talk to the men at the long table where twenty miners were wolfing down food.

There was a table at the far side of the room, set for twelve. One of the miners brought her a chair and she sat down near the end of the table. A man wearing an apron made from a sugar sack came and stood by her, wiping his hands.

"You eatin'?" he said.

"Not yet," she said, "but I intend to, just as soon as the girls come down. You and the widow get married yet?"

"Poof!" the man said. He blew through his mustache. "That old apple knocker?"

"I'll tell her you said so," Lily said.

"Go ahead," the waiter said. "See if I care." He stalked off toward the kitchen. A man called for more flapjacks and the waiter stopped and swiveled his head.

"Go to hell, will yuh?" he said. He clapped his hand over his mouth. "Damn it, I'm sorry, Miss Lily— I mean—"

He turned a scarlet-red and hurried back toward the kitchen. The men waited and when Lily started to laugh they joined with her, uproariously.

The girls came into the dining-room chattering like magpies. They were young, for the most part good-looking. They were well dressed; Lily was proud of her girls. Two years ago she had been one of them, just a dancer in a traveling show. The show had gone broke in a town two hundred miles from here and Lily had taken over. The girls owed a lot to Lily. She owed a lot to them.

They ate with the appetite of good health and for the most part their conversation was of women's things and men. Now and then a small argument would flare and they would turn to Lily to settle it. She glanced down the table and saw Belle, a girl with soft brown hair and dreamy blue eyes. Belle hadn't touched her food.

"What's the matter, Belle?" Lily said.

A sudden silence ran around the table and most of the girls were busy eating. Belle sat there, her head down and then she was looking up, straight at Lily, and her eyes were angry.

"You might as well know about it," she said. "I'm quitting!"

"You're what?"

"I said I'm quitting!" There was defiance in the girl's eyes and in the tilt of her chin. Lily was angry. She had no formal contract with these girls but it had been understood that no one could quit without giving enough notice so that she could be replaced.

"All right, Belle," Lily said quietly. "I'll send word back east. I know an agent in Chicago."

"I'm quitting now, Lily. I'm sorry, but I'm quitting now." There were tears in the girl's eyes and she was suddenly very young and very beautiful.

A blonde at the end of the table said, "She's getting married."

"Is that true, Belle?" Lily said.

"Yes it's true and there isn't anything you can do about it."

"Who is he, Belle?"

"Tommy Walker."

"Tommy Walker?" She thought of the young, blond giant who had tried to start a vegetable farm out in the valley and had failed. He was trying cows now. "Are you crazy, Belle?"

"Lily, I've wanted to tell you for a month," the girl said miserably, "but I knew it would just be a scene."

"Why, he hasn't even got a job," Lily said. The anger was rising in her. "He hasn't got anything."

"We love each other."

"What do you want to do, go on working to support him?"

"He's going into the cattle business," Belle said hotly. "He used to work on a cattle ranch down in Texas—"

"If he can make a living, why did he leave it?" Lily said. "You don't get anything for nothing in this world, Belle, and if you marry Tommy Walker that's exactly what you're getting. Nothing."

The girl was standing up. "You can't talk that way about him, Lily," she said softly. "Not even you can talk that way. Someday you'll find out there's something else in this world besides money, and when you do I hope you don't get hurt as badly as I think you will. I'm quitting, Lily, and we're getting married tomorrow. I was in hopes I could ask you to be at the wedding." She put down her napkin and walked quickly out of the room and there was a long silence.

"She'll learn," the blonde at the end of the table said.

"Shut up," Lily said.

"Hey, what's the idea?" the blonde said.

"You're the idea," Lily said. "I told you to shut up." She stood up suddenly and pulled her coat around her shoulders.

"Why, you—" the blonde said. "You can't talk to me that way."

"Don't start anything, sweetheart," Lily said calmly. "You'd look mighty funny without your hair." She hurried outside, angry, hurt, a little bewildered. It was the first time she had ever had trouble with any of the girls. Belle, that crazy, moon-eyed kid!

She crossed the street to the Golden Lily. Two bartenders were on shift and Travis Mort, Wyoming, and Newt Tregor, the guards and bouncers, were there. There were no customers as yet.

She went straight back to Sam's office, wanting to talk to him, but he wasn't there yet. She sat down in his chair at the desk. What on earth was going wrong with things all of a sudden? Just a week ago everything had been fine, business good, the percentage from the gambling-devices just right.

Milo Stuart, that was the main trouble! He was the one who had started acting up. A week ago she and Sam and Milo had sat in this office and talked about buying cattle and stocking the valley and Milo had been the most enthusiastic of the three. Now he had walked out and Belle was walking out and that dirty little Elmer Hammer

had won five hundred dollars on the roulette wheel and walked out with it in his pockets.

She got up and went back out into the main room of the saloon. Newt Tregor was over by the wheel, his sour cigar smelling up the air around his thick shoulders. She reached in her reticule and took out a ten-dollar gold piece and flipped it onto the table.

"Spin it for me, Newt," she said.

Newt Tregor looked at her, his eyes completely devoid of expression. "I thought you quit gamblin', Lily," he said.

"Everything's a gamble, Newt," she said. "Spin it." Newt Tregor spun the wheel and Lily lost.

"Here's your ten," Newt said, pushing the gold piece back. "You wasn't playin' for keeps, was you?"

"I always play for keeps, Newt," Lily said. "I thought you knew that."

She walked away from the wheel, ran a finger across the bar, testing it for dust. The bartender grinned at her. She paced up and down the room and she saw Wyoming and Newt and Travis Mort watching her. She stopped suddenly and glared at the bartender.

"Did you know Belle was getting married?" she said.

"Didn't know it for sure," the bartender said. "I sort of suspected it."

"Well what have you done about it?" she said angrily.

The bartender spread his hands. "What could I do?"

"You could have taken up a collection," she said. "Here." She threw a twenty-dollar gold piece on the bar. "Start it with this."

"Sure, Lily."

"And, Sweeny—"

"Yes?"

"I don't approve of my girls marrying some no-account good-for-nothing, understand? If you men want to take up a collection, that's your business but I want nothing to do with it, you hear?"

"Sure, Lily," Sweeny said. "I hear." He turned away from her so she couldn't see his grin. "Hey, Wyoming," he yelled, "how about a few dollars for the kitty? Belle's gettin' married."

"Count me out," Wyoming said. "I ain't paid to help cowboys get a start."

Lily walked outside. The sun was trying to break through the gray overcast. Two men were talking on the sidewalk and she heard one of them say:

"I look for the Bucket outfit to close down for good. They can't make a go of it with their rock gradin' out the way it is."

"Busthead Gallagher pulled out yesterday," the other man said. "Maybe he ain't smart in some ways but he can smell a strike and he sticks until it's gone—"

She moved away, not wanting to hear more. A horseman on the trail that led up the canyon attracted her attention. She glanced at him and then her heart skipped and seemed to stop in her throat. It was Milo, riding slowly down the trail, leading a pack horse. It was Milo, coming back!

This is silly, she told herself. This is

just plain crazy. She gripped her hands and compressed her lips. *But no, it isn't silly. I'm glad to see him back because Sam and I need him. Milo knows cattle, we don't. We have to have Milo. He can handle cattle and he can handle men. Men like Wyoming and Travis and Newt. That's the only reason in the world I'm glad to see him back. Business, pure and simple.*

It was a good argument. She wished her heart would listen to the argument and go back where it belonged. Milo saw her and he lifted his hand and waved. Just then Casey Beal, standing in front of his office across the street, looked up. His eyes narrowed and he lifted his gun belt with the flats of his hands.

"I'll be damned," Casey Beal said. "I wonder if Sam knows about this?" He hurried across the street.

Chapter Nine

Glen Lacey's Daughter

MILO tied his horse in front of the Golden Lily. He took his time about it and he kept glancing up at Lily, standing there waiting for him. When he was finished he took off his gloves and tucked them in his belt and blew on his hands.

"I haven't changed my mind, Lily," he said, "if that's what you're thinking. I came to ask you a favor."

"I'm careful with favors," she said, "unless there's a good return."

"No return on this," he said. "I've got a man out at my cabin. He's been hurt and I think his fingers are froze. I want you to come do what you can."

"I'm no doctor," she said.

"You'll do until one comes along," he said. "I'll be leaving in half an hour. Want to pick up some supplies."

He turned and walked down the street toward the general store and she stood there watching him, knowing she would do what he asked, angered because he had been so sure of her. Why couldn't she just tell him to go to the devil?

She went back inside the saloon and got her coat and Sam Templin was there talking to Casey Beal. Wyoming was lounging against the bar, listening, and Travis Mort and Newt Tregor were having a morning pick-up. Sam motioned to Lily with a jerk of his head.

"What does he want?"

"A man's hurt out at his cabin. I'm going out to see what I can do."

"What man?" Sam said. There were dark smudges under his eyes showing his lack of sleep, and he kept tapping on the bar top with his fingers.

"What difference does it make?" Lily said.

"No difference," Sam said, "except that you've got a business to run here."

"It'll run, all right," Lily said. She started to leave and Sam stopped her.

"Lily?"

"Yes?"

"Nothing," he said. "I'll talk to Milo." He watched her hurry out and down the street.

Wyoming downed his drink and pushed himself away from the bar. He was a long, lean man with a narrow, horsy face. He looked at Sam Templin and laughed.

"You want me to earn my wages?" he said.

"Shut up," Sam said.

Wyoming shrugged. "Just asking." He took a stack of poker chips off the

bar and started running them through his hands. He stopped it when Milo Stuart came in through the door.

Sam tried to be jovial. "Didn't expect you back so soon, kid," he said. "Get lonesome?"

"Wouldn't say so," Milo said, thumbing back his hat. He motioned for a bottle. "I've had a lot of company."

"Hear you're running a hospital," Sam said.

Milo grinned. "Something like that."

"No money in that, is there?" Sam said.

"Can't tell yet," Milo said. "Haven't balanced the books." He poured himself a drink and downed it. He reached in his pocket for a quarter and Sam shook his head.

"It's on the house," Sam said.

"Thanks just the same," Milo said, "but I've still got a dollar or so." He paid for the drink.

The silence ran thick between them and there was perspiration on Sam's upper lip. "You want to get it out in the open?" he said finally.

"Sure," Milo said. "Why not?" He turned with his back to the bar, his left heel hooked over the rail. "Glen Lacey moved his trail herd into my valley. I'll be grazed off in three or four days. I reckon if I want to go into the cow business like I figured I'll have to move down into the big valley myself. That open enough?"

"You think that'll change my mind about anything?" Sam said. His voice was tight in his throat.

"I hoped it might," Milo said.

"It don't."

"Looks like a long winter then, don't it?" Milo said.

"Or maybe you and me will wind up being neighbors in the cow business," Sam said. "I hadn't planned on any neighbors."

"There's other valleys, Sam," Milo said quietly. "There's other trail herds to buy. It's as simple as that."

"You better find one of those valleys then, kid."

The smile never left Milo's face. "I already got cows," he said. "So has Glen Lacey. A man don't trail his cows any further than necessary. I reckon the big valley will be all right with us."

The perspiration on Sam's lip was thick now. "What makes you think you can get along with Lacey?"

"I didn't say anything about getting along with anybody, Sam," Milo said. "I just said I was moving into the big valley." He stood there looking at his foster brother, that half smile on his face. "You've given me lots of advice in our time, Sam," he said evenly. "Now I'm giving you some. Leave the valley alone."

He turned and left the saloon and he met Lily at the door. She had put on a plain woolen dress and a heavy coat and she had a small carpet bag in her hand. "Ready?" Milo said.

She glanced at Sam and the men at the bar and saw the tension in their faces. "I guess so."

"You're not going anyplace, Lily," Sam said.

The whip in his voice made her turn and it brought bright spots of color to her cheeks. "I think I'll decide that."

"It's the Lacey outfit he's got out there," Sam said.

She turned and met Milo's eyes. "Is that true?"

"That's right," Milo said. "It's Glen Lacey that's hurt. His wife and daughter are pretty much done in."

She fought a quick impulse to tell him to go straight to the devil and a stronger impulse that made her want

to see Margaret Lacey, the girl who had upset this man's life so completely. Her answer was for Sam.

"We want to stay on the good side of Lacey, don't we?" she said. "We want to buy his cows."

"You might as well forget that, Lily," Milo said. "His cows aren't for sale."

"I'll hear that from him," Lily said. "Not you." Her breathing was high in her chest. "Well? What are we waiting for?"

"Not a thing," Milo said. "I got you a sidesaddle—"

"The boss says you're not goin' noplace." It was Travis Mort, a squat, dark man with thick shoulders and legs and no neck. He stepped away from the bar and put his hand on Lily's arm. "Didn't you hear him?"

"Get your hands off the lady, Mort," Milo said.

Mort's grip tightened on Lily's arm. "This Milo don't work here no more," he said. "I wouldn't associate with him if I was you."

The edge of Milo's hand chopped against Travis Mort's forearm. The bouncer jerked back and whirled, an ugly snarl on his lips, and then he threw himself at Milo.

Milo had seen Mort work a hundred times. He had taken Mort's victims and locked them up if they were unusually out of hand. He had even helped Mort in a rough-and-tumble a time or two. He knew that Mort's secret was in those heavy arms. He would rush in close and get his arms around a man. He could crack ribs that way.

When Mort rushed in Milo was ready. His fist came up in a short arc and caught Mort squarely on the chin. The bouncer half turned and Milo got him with a left, right behind the ear. At that moment Lily Devore's girls came in to get ready for their ten-o'clock show.

As usual, the men who had been lounging in the hotel lobby and in the restaurant followed the girls across the street. There were about twenty of them and they all reached the door right after the girls. The girls saw the scuffle, saw Milo hit Travis Mort, and they all screamed, turned, and started to back out. Someone in the crowd of men saw the movement inside, yelled "Fight!" and the men pressed forward. In that sudden tangle of men and girls Newt Tregor, coming in to help Mort, was cut off and Wyoming, his gun half drawn, was unable to do anything.

Mort shook his head like a wounded bear and charged back in and Milo hit him again. He broke through Milo's guard and landed a solid blow against Milo's middle. It drove the breath from Milo and he had to give ground and as he did he saw Newt Tregor coming through the crowd.

With Mort on one side, Tregor on the other, there was nothing he could do but back himself against the bar and fight as best he could. He lifted his leg and kicked straight out and got Mort in the chest. Tregor made a run at him and Lily deliberately got in the way. She was knocked down but so was Tregor and it gave Milo a chance to give his full attention to Mort.

Mort charged in, his head down, and Milo was able to clip him again but this time he followed through, chopping Mort across the back of the neck with the edge of his hand, hitting him again when Mort's head went down. He locked his hands around Mort's neck, forced his head down and at the same time brought his knee up hard, smashing Mort's face, putting him out of the fight. The crowd at the door

parted and Casey Beal was there, his marshal's badge on his vest, a gun in his hand.

"Break it up, Stuart," Casey Beal said. He started walking forward, the gun held at ready.

The bruise where Milo had hit him was still visible on Casey's face. There was hot hatred in his yellow-green eyes and his lips were pulled away from his stained teeth. Down at the end of the bar Wyoming's hand tightened around the butt of his own gun. The noise of the crowd died as suddenly as it had started and everyone stood there and in that complete silence Sam Templin's voice was loud.

"Get out, Milo," he said.

"I'll take care of him, Sam," Casey Beal said. He spoke in a thick whisper. "Just let me take care of him."

Lily Devore had dropped her purse when she had been knocked down by Tregor. She stooped now to pick it up and when she straightened her shoulder hit Casey Beal's arm, knocking it upward. There was a blur of movement and Milo Stuart was standing there, a cocked gun in his hand. It covered Casey Beal and Newt Tregor. At the same instant there was a grunt of pain from down at the end of the bar as Sam Templin sank his fist deep into Wyoming's thin middle. The tall gunman doubled over, his gun chunking back into its holster.

"Thanks, Sam," Milo said softly. "I'll remember that."

"Don't bother," Sam Templin said. "Get out!"

"Come on, Lily," Milo said. He still held the gun in his hand and as he walked by Casey Beal he said, "The next time you draw that thing on me be ready to use it."

"I will," Casey said.

Sam Templin's voice cracked out at them. "I told you to stay here, Lily."

Lily Devore turned and her eyes were steady and hard. "You're my partner, Sam," she said, "not my boss." The crowd opened and she walked outside, followed by Milo. The crowd surged into the saloon and the moment of danger was gone.

Wyoming caught his breath with a choking gulp. For a moment his hand was tense over his gun and then he relaxed.

"Are you crazy, Sam?" he said finally.

The perspiration was trickling down Sam Templin's cheeks. "Sorry I had to hit you," he said.

"I don't know nothin' about your business, Sam," Wyoming said, "but I do know my own. You give a man like Stuart an inch and he'll take a mile."

"Or maybe if you give him enough rope he'll hang himself," Sam said. He was staring at the window and he could see Milo and Lily outside.

"If I was giving the orders I'd get rid of him," Wyoming said.

"You're not giving the orders, Wyoming," Sam said quietly. "Don't forget that. And anytime you don't like my orders you can pack and take your boys with you."

"Now, Sam," Wyoming said, "no call to get sore. It's just that I don't want to see this Stuart push you around."

"He won't push me," Sam Templin said. "Nobody will." He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face. "You know he told me to get rid of you and your boys, don't you? You know that's what the squabble was about?"

"I figgered it was," Wyoming said.

"Well, you're still here, aren't you?" Sam said.

The smile on Wyoming's face was full blown.

"I'm sure sorry I called you crazy, Boss."

"That's all right," Sam said. He walked across the saloon and stood at the window and he saw Milo put his arm around Lily to help her into the saddle.

Milo didn't speak to Lily as he helped her up on the horse but he felt the warmth of her body as he lifted her and he felt the trembling that was the reaction to fear. She had possibly saved his life there a moment ago and Sam Templin had done the same and yet he was deliberately fighting them and he would continue to fight them if they went ahead with their plans.

Tormenting thoughts were with him as he swung into his own saddle and tugged on the pack horse's lead rope. He owed a lot to Sam Templin, and now to Lily Devore. He remembered the way Glen Lacey's voice had sounded, crying out in delirium, calling him "Bert." You could owe a lot to a dead man, too—

The trail lifted steadily and in a mile the horses were blowing. They came to a small meadow where a stream spread away from an ice-fringed bank and here Milo reined up. He dismounted and helped Lily down.

"Thanks, Lily," he said.

"For nothing," she said. "I didn't want blood on the floor."

"Then thanks for coming along out here."

She gave a disgusted little snort. "You know Sam well enough to know that you can't let him order you around. That's the only reason I'm here."

"All right, Lily," Milo said. "Have it your way." He led the horses over to the stream and Lily Devore fought the tears that kept trying to force themselves into her eyes.

Damn damn damn, she said under her breath, then, clenching her hands and gritting her teeth, *Damn damn and double damn.*

They rode in silence, Milo leading the way, Lily following along behind the pack horse. At the top of the ridge they paused and down below and ahead of them was the little beaver valley, choked with cattle now. Smoke was trailing from the chimney of the cabin and the snow-covered surface of the pond was like a handkerchief on a muddy floor.

So this is what he wants, she thought to herself, *and this is what Tommy Walker and Belle want.* "Milo," she said suddenly, "I'll buy you out!"

He turned slowly in his saddle and faced her. He looked surprisingly young and he looked more contented than she had ever seen him look.

"You'll what?" he said.

"I'll buy you out," she said. "I'll give you market price for your beef and I'll pay you whatever you think your lease on this valley is worth—"

He started to laugh. "I haven't any lease," he said. "I just liked this valley, that's all. Nobody was using it so I moved in. It's ruined now, so I'm moving out. Over the hill there." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the big valley that ran down between the Gravellies and the Madisons. "Plenty of room over there," he said.

"Then why isn't there room for all of us?" she said quickly. "Why can't we work this out?"

"You better answer your own question, Lily," he said quietly. "You and Sam know why you're the way you are. I don't." He flicked the reins against his horse's shoulder and the

animal shied and headed down the trail.

Lily Devore watched Milo Stuart's back and she remembered him as he was when he had first come to Oro. He was nervous then, jumping at shadows, willing to do anything as long as he was busy. She had fallen for him—she might as well admit it—and she could be around him as much as she wanted. That was about all she could ask. She would never admit to any man that she loved him. Now he was gone and there was a new confidence in him that she had never seen. And now that he had that confidence he didn't need her. He didn't need anyone.

They dropped down into the valley and the cattle stood there spread-legged and dumb-eyed. She had never seen so many cattle in one bunch before and they frightened her.

"How much are these beasts worth apiece?" she said.

"Oh, thirty-forty dollars the way they are," Milo said. "Fatten 'em up a little and they'll bring sixty, maybe more."

"And they have calves and the calves grow up and they're worth money like that too?"

"It keeps going on and on," Milo said, grinning.

She glanced around her, trying to figure in her mind how many cattle were in this valley. A thousand, maybe? Sixty dollars apiece times a thousand cattle—this was big business!

They were at the cabin and still they weren't away from the cattle. Four men were out at the shed barn at the side of the house. The door opened and Margaret Lacey was standing there.

Lily knew it was Margaret and she didn't like what she saw. Margaret was a much larger girl than she had expected to see. She wanted Margaret to be thin and scrawny and have buck teeth. Margaret wasn't like that—she was tall and blond and almost statuesque and there was a lot of determination in that chin and fight in that jaw. She liked Margaret Lacey even less than she had thought she would. When Milo helped her out of the saddle she clung to his neck and smiled at him until she was sure Margaret had seen it.

"This is Lily Devore, Margaret Lacey," Milo was saying. He was sort of chewing his words.

"I didn't come here on a social call," said Lily Devore. "I was told there was a sick man here."

She went straight into the cabin and saw the bulk of the bearded man on the bed, the thin little woman leaning over him. The smell of fever was in the room.

The man on the bed opened his eyes. "Is that you, Bert?"

"Hush, Glen," Mrs. Lacey said. "Everything is all right."

"Don't sell those cows, Bert," Glen Lacey whispered. "As long as we hang onto those cows we're still in business."

"Got any quinine?" Lily said. "If you haven't, I have. I brought some along. And let's get something hot on his chest. Mustard and flour, if there is any. Ask Milo. He brought some things from town. If not that, anything that we can heat up."

She hadn't noticed that Margaret was standing close to her, looking down at her. "How bad, Miss Devore?" Margaret said. She was a daughter, worried about her father.

Lily's voice was soft. "Pretty bad, I'm afraid," she said. "But we can always hope."

Chapter Ten

The Next Hill

THE bawl of the cattle filled the valley. The men had built a fire and they had cooked their own supper and Milo had eaten with them, one of them and yet completely alone. The lights glowed in the cabin, and he thought of Lily Devore working over a sick old man.

The night wore on and the men went to bed—men he had known and men he would never know. Rip, Fenton, Boles, Nizic—names and nothing more, even though they were names he had known for a long time. Clete Benson walked up to the fire and poured himself a cup of coffee and young Terry Crawford lit his tenth cigarette.

"Cold," Terry Crawford said to no one in particular.

"Yeah, cold," Milo said.

He watched them go to bed, one by one, men he had known, men who said nothing, and finally there were only Clete Benson and Terry Crawford left.

Clete said, "The venison came in handy."

"Mighty handy," Terry Crawford said. He got his blankets and spread them out on a thin lawyer of straw. He started to take off his shirt. "Going to bed, Stuart?" he said.

"Time, I guess," Milo said.

He made a pretense of fixing his blankets and actually did nothing about it. The fire had died down and the men were sleeping and he was alone, more alone than he had ever been in his life. He spread his blankets on the hard floor of the shed and took off his boots and stretched out, and for hours he stared at the darkness.

It was midnight, he guessed, when he heard Lily call his name, softly.

"Yes?" he said.

"I'm sorry, Milo," she said. "I thought you'd want to know. He was tough, but he wasn't that tough."

"Gone?"

"That's right."

He sat there, staring into the darkness. "I shouldn't have waited," he said. "I shouldn't have wasted the time in town. If I had been a half hour sooner finding him—if I could have gotten to him—"

"Feeling sorry for yourself again?" she said.

"No," he said. "I don't think so."

"Well, don't," she said. "A half hour—two hours—it wouldn't have made any difference. It was cold up there. He was an old man."

"Thanks anyway," Milo said.

Lily Devore stood there. She couldn't understand the feeling of complete despair that was in her. It wasn't the first time she had seen death. But this death tonight had startled her, and she couldn't tell why. One moment Glen Lacey had been sitting upright in his bed, his eyes wide open, fully conscious. He had called to his wife and his wife had come to him and he had looked at her and smiled. For that short moment he had been a soft and sentimental man with a dream in his eye and a promise in his voice.

"I wanted you to have the world, Abbie," he said. and that was the last he said. He lay down quietly and he died and Margaret Lacey had gone to her mother and put her arms about her and held her close.

Milo looked into the blackness and he was thinking of another night when lights had been bright on the streets

and another Lacey had died– He said, "I'll tell the men."

Lily went back to the cabin and the two women were there and there was nothing but silence. She wished they would cry, the way she had heard other women cry, but they didn't. They knelt there by the bed, a small, frail woman and a strong young girl. In a way she envied them the fact that they had someone to mourn.

She said finally, "I'm sorry."

It was Margaret who stood up and offered her hand. "We're grateful to you, Miss Devore. It was kind of you to come. Shall I make some coffee?"

"Why not?" Lily said. "Go ahead."

She watched Margaret put coffee into the pot and when the silence was unbearable she said, "You'll be going back to Oregon, of course?"

Margaret Lacey half turned her head and the firelight reflected on her face. She looked remarkably like her father. She shook her head.

"It's been a long, long way," she said. "Day after day we kept moving the herd east and day after day Dad kept promising us a valley over the hill. We kept moving, but we never saw it. It gets to meaning something after a while," she said. "It gets to meaning everything." There was a faint smile around her mouth. "It's the next hill, I guess. If Bert were here he'd push them across the hill and he'd build a ranch. The least I can do is try."

Lily felt an unaccountable surge of temper. "No man would have a right to expect that from a couple of women," she said. "You could sell out and go back to Oregon."

Margaret shook her head. "We could have done that in Boise," she said. "But we didn't."

The door opened and Milo Stuart stood there, his coat buttoned around his chest, his hat pulled down on his forehead. "I'll take you home, Lily," he said.

Home? Where was that? A burned-out mansion in South Carolina? A dingy room in a Chicago hotel? She looked at Milo Stuart and she looked at Margaret Lacey and she hated them both because they had something she had never had and perhaps never would have. They had an anchor to the wind–something to tie to. Those dumb, bawling beasts out there. Cattle. If a man had cattle he had hope, and both these people knew it and it was something between them that was stronger than gun-fighting and death in a cabin. And now Belle would have it. Belle and Tommy Walker.

She thought of her own world, a hard, cold world where you fought for every bite of food and you lost if you didn't fight. She saw Mrs. Lacey bending over the bed, her face buried in the covers. And suddenly she was as hard as Sam Templin wanted her to be.

"It's nice to be noble, sister," she said, "but you might as well face the facts. You'd be a lot better off back in Oregon."

"We'd better go, Lily," Milo said.

"It's a big, bad world," Lily said. "You've seen a little piece of it tonight, but it's only a piece of it. It can be a lot worse."

"I've saddled your horse," Milo said.

"This is an unfriendly country you're coming into," Lily said. "I don't think you'd like it here and I don't think people would like you. As for that valley you're talking about, I've already decided to use it. I'll buy your cattle and I'll pay you cash and we'll part friends and no feelings hurt."

Fingers tightened on her arm. "The horses are ready," Milo said.

She jerked away from him and opened the door and went outside and she heard Margaret calling after her. She hurried out toward the shed and then she stopped and looked around. She saw Margaret and Milo standing there in the doorway. She could hear Margaret's voice plainly.

"Thanks for what you've done, Milo," Margaret said. "I'll pay you for your trouble."

The light was full on his face and Lily could see the pain and the longing. She saw his hands start up and then drop to his side and she heard him say, "I wish I could have done more. I've wanted to for a long time, Margaret. I haven't forgotten. I couldn't."

Margaret Lacey put her hands over her face and now for the first time she was crying, her shoulders shaking with her sobs. Clete Benson came out of the darkness and put his arm around her and led her into the house and one by one the other men were there, their hats in their hands, and Terry Crawford was there and he seemed to belong. Milo turned and walked swiftly toward the shed. When he spoke to Lily his voice was gruff.

"I told you his cows weren't for sale, didn't I?"

They were close together there in the darkness and Lily could feel the torment that was in him. She turned suddenly and put her arms around his neck and pulled his head close. She kissed him solidly on the lips, holding him, telling him everything she could possibly tell him with that kiss. He pushed her away.

"What brought that on?" he said.

"Nothing, I guess," she said, and she knew a cold, calculating rage that grew like a flame. Cattle. Was that what he wanted? Then she'd give him cattle— She thought of Margaret Lacey and it was like a magnet drawing the steel fragments of her anger.

If you hadn't come here, she thought, *he might have loved me. If you stay, he never will.*

Chapter Eleven

Paid in Full

IT WAS a clear, cold day with a white sun that gave no heat. Around the valley the rim of peaks was brilliant with new snow and the limbs of the willows along the pond were jeweled with ice. Clete Benson and Terry Crawford circled the herd and started them moving toward the low pass that led to the big valley. Boles and Nizic loaded the blanket-wrapped body of Glen Lacey into the bed wagon.

"He'd want to be buried where we settle," Abigail Lacey said.

Riding back from town where he had left Lily Devore, Milo heard the sound of the herd on the move. He was desperately tired, chilled to the bone. He rode slowly, slouched in his saddle, and he didn't see the two riders who had cut into the trail ahead of him.

Wyoming looked at Casey Beal and motioned him off the trail with a jerk of his head. "I'll handle it." He drew a Winchester carbine from its saddle scabbard and levered in a shell.

Casey Beal's teeth were chattering. "You sure you know what you're doing, Wyoming?"

"I stay alive by knowin' what I'm doin'," Wyoming said. "This Stuart talks too much with his mouth. Someday Sam Templin might listen to him and maybe you and me would be out of a job. I don't like bein' out of a job, Casey."

"I don't like this," Casey said. "I don't like it a damn bit."

"Then close your eyes," Wyoming said. He reined his horse off the trail and waited, his rifle ready.

Down in the valley the cattle were forming into a wedge and the riders were shaping them up. Milo saw the chuck wagon and the bed wagon head out across the valley toward the slope that led up to the ridge and there was a lonesome, hopeless feeling in him that wouldn't go away. He touched spurs to his horse's flanks and the animal broke into a jogging trot.

He had talked to Clete Benson about moving his own cows along with the herd, telling Clete they could cut them out once the herd was settled in the valley. It would be too much of a job and take too much time to do it there in the little valley, he told Clete. Actually he wanted an excuse to ride along with the Wagon Tongues, an excuse to remain close to Margaret that much longer.

His thoughts went back to Sam and Lily and he wondered just how far Sam would go with his plans. He couldn't make himself believe that Sam would make a real fight out of this. He wasn't selling Wyoming short. Wyoming was a professional gunman, but a gunman didn't do things on his own. He waited for orders.

And that's why I left you, Sam, he thought to himself. *I don't want you to feel the security of having a hired gun on your side. If you ever felt that, I'm afraid it would be the end of you.* His right hand dropped down and touched the gun in its holster. Immediately he heard the shot.

It felt as if someone had poured a bucket of scalding water over the top of his head. For a second he hung there in the saddle, the world exploding in front of his eyes, and then he saw the ground coming up to meet him, felt it reach up and beat against his body and then he was rolling or the earth was turning and there was another shot and dirt stung his eyes and blood was running down his face. Someplace a horse was running and then there was a silence that rolled in on a black cloud and pressed against his brain and blinded him and now it was dark. He knew that his hand was locked around the butt of his gun but he couldn't draw the weapon.

Back on the trail Wyoming spurred his horse toward town.

The black cloud swirled and lifted and now it was a red cloud and Milo knew it was his own blood, running into his eyes. He tried to wipe it away and his arms were like lead. After what seemed hours he got his neckerchief free and he wadded it up and pressed it against the cut on his right temple and gradually his senses cleared. It was then he heard the horse on the trail.

His first thought was that the ambusher was coming back to finish the job he had come so near completing. He forced himself to his knees and tried to crawl forward. He slipped and rolled farther down the bank and managed to drag himself behind some boulders. He could see the trail from here but it was all a blur and it wasn't until the man dismounted that he recognized Casey Beal.

Beal stood there at the edge of the trail, a cocked gun in his hand. His face was pasty white and the gun was shaking as he moved back and forth, peering down the bank. Milo drew his own gun and cocked it but still that blur was in front of his eyes and the gun weighed a ton. He wished Casey would come closer but apparently the marshal had no intention of doing that.

After what seemed an hour Casey backed away, out of sight, and Milo heard the sound of a horse being ridden fast. The hoofbeats seemed to travel through the ground and jar his body and he was gripped with a sudden sickness. He sat there, retching violently, and in time the blackness was complete.

SOMEONE was shaking him, sloshing water in his face. He opened his eyes and saw the pinched features of Clete Benson staring down at him. He closed his eyes again and opened them, and he saw Terry Crawford. Terry's young face was set in hard lines, his eyes frosty.

"He's coming around," Clete Benson said.

It was a good fifteen minutes before he could make sense. "We heard the shots," Benson said, "and then your horse came in."

Milo ran his fingers along the cut on his scalp. Blood had matted the hair and blood was caked on his cheek. He still felt dizzy and sick but he managed to get to his feet with Clete's help. He tried to grin.

"Somebody doesn't like me," he said.

"Is that news?" It was Terry Crawford and there was anger in his voice.

"What the hell's biting you?" Milo said.

It was Clete Benson who answered. "I told you this wouldn't work when I first saw you, Stuart," Benson said. "You're a trouble man. You always have been, you always will be. You acted like a white man there in the valley and I'll remember that, but it don't buy you no ticket to heaven. I don't know what your private war is here and I don't give a damn, but from here on out you stay away from our outfit. We got trouble enough without you."

"Wait a minute, Clete—" The temper was hot in him now, parching his throat.

"We got twenty cows of yours," Clete Benson said. "We'll cut 'em out and leave 'em in that first canyon on this side of the creek. Nobody will bother you when you come to get 'em. After that, stay away from us."

The temper had driven the sickness out of Milo's body. He stood there in front of these two men and he remembered that he had wanted to help them. But there was no helping them and there was no helping Margaret. The past was too strong.

"I warned you to stay out of that valley, Clete," he said. "I'm warning you again. There's a man figures that valley belongs to him. Rest your herd and let 'em feed a couple of days and then move on."

"Still hiring your gun, are you, Stuart?" Terry Crawford had unbuttoned his coat.

Milo fought a desire to draw his gun and crack the barrel of it across this kid's skull. "Get this," he said, "and get it straight. I got a few cows and I mean to run 'em in the valley. I don't want trouble for myself and I don't

want trouble for you folks. One good way to keep from having it is for you to move along."

"We don't bluff that easy, Stuart," Terry Crawford said. He jerked his head. "Your horse is up on the trail."

"You better stay in that town of Oro where you belong, Stuart," Clete Benson said. "And tell Sam Templin he can save hisself the trouble of trying to buy us out."

"Sam Templin?" Milo tried to keep his voice steady.

"Wasn't we supposed to know about him?" Clete Benson said. "You should have told that Lily woman not to talk so much. Sam Templin used to be a pretty good kid when I knowed him. I'm surprised he let hisself be drug down by a maverick like you."

Milo's hand shot out and gripped the front of Clete's shirt. He pulled the old man close and he heard Terry's voice, backed by a gun. "Let loose, Stuart." Slowly Milo's fingers relaxed. The gun in Terry's hand prodded against Milo's back.

"I always heard you were rotten, Stuart," Terry said. "I never figured you were as rotten as Margaret said, but I guess she was right. It's a nice setup you got, Sam Templin handling the money, you making the gun threats. Pick up your twenty cows and then stay to hell out of our way or I'll take care of you, sure as hell." He jabbed the gun. "Up on the trail, Stuart. You're getting a break because Margaret figured we owed you something for the graze and the use of the cabin. I'll tell her tonight it's been paid in full."

They helped Milo onto his horse and headed the animal down the trail. The pain was still dancing crazily in his head and he had to hang onto the saddle horn. The anger that was in him was an explosive thing that cried for an outlet. He thought of Casey Beal and he managed to get hold of the reins and keep his horse headed toward Oro.

In time the wash of air against his face cleared his brain and when he got to the creek he dismounted and for a long time he knelt there, sloshing the icy water over his face and head, washing away the caked blood. It was now noon.

IN THE office at the back of the Golden Lily Sam Templin took his watch from his pocket and wound it tightly. The room was full of cigar smoke and there was perspiration on his face. Wyoming sat sprawled in a chair, his hat pushed back on his head. He had had too much to drink and his cheeks were flushed with it.

"What the hell," he said for the fourth time, "it's what you wanted."

"Shut up, will you?" Sam Templin said.

"Quit worrying," Wyoming said. "You'll get what you paid for. I do the dirty work, I take the chances. Nobody's got nothing on you." He took the bottle from the desk and drank from it. His eyes were squinted to narrow slits. "But start talkin' nicer to me, Sam," he said. "Don't make me mad at you, because that wouldn't be healthy for you."

"Why didn't you wait?" Sam said. "Why did you have to be in such a damn hurry? Maybe he would have backed out—"

"I thought of that," Wyoming said. He was rolling a cigarette and his lips were smiling. "I thought of that and I figgered I didn't want him to back out. I figgered if maybe he come back

whinin' around you might give him a job and cut him in on the cattle business. I didn't want that, Sam. You know why I didn't want it?" He struck a match and held it unsteadily in front of the cigarette. "Because *I* want to be cut in on the cattle business, Sam. I'd make you a fine partner."

"Are you crazy?"

"Naw," Wyoming said. "I'm not crazy." He laughed boisterously.

"Damn you, Wyoming—"

"Now be careful," Wyoming said. "You be right nice to me, Sam. We'll get along a lot better that way." He opened his mouth wide and let a ball of smoke escape. "And I figger we better replace Casey Beal, Sam. I got a sudden hankerin' to be a lawman myself. I'm a lot better man than Casey Beal."

He pursed his lips and blew the smoke in a thin ribbon. "Casey's the nervous type, Sam. Something like you. I don't like the nervous type." He stood up, hitching at his gun belt.

"See you later, partner," he said. He pushed his hat up from behind and stepped out into the main part of the saloon.

Sam Templin looked at his hands. They were shaking violently. The door swung inward and he jumped to his feet and then sat back down again when he saw it was Lily. She had had a few hours' sleep and she had bathed and fixed her hair and she looked completely rested. She stared at Sam curiously.

"What's the matter with you?" she said. "Has all this talk of the camp closing down got under your hide?"

"Yeah," he said quickly. "That's it."

She laughed. "It's not closed yet."

"Maybe there's something to it, Lily," he said. "Maybe we ought to sell out and get going while the going's good."

"Sell out? Have you lost your mind?"

"What's so crazy about that?" he said hotly. "Have you ever seen one of these camps bust? Well, I have. In a day's time there wouldn't be a soul around here."

"We'll worry about it when it happens," she said. "Anyway, we've got our bets coppered. We've got money out at good interest—"

"That's the trouble," he said. "We've got too much out."

"So we'll start calling it in," she said.

"Suppose they can't pay?"

"They can always pay," she said, "one way or another." She smiled. "Like the merchants around town. They can do some favors for us."

"Like what?"

"Like being out of everything Margaret Lacey wants to buy." She caught his gaze and held it. "Or had you forgotten that we were going into the cattle business?"

"No, of course not," he said, "only I—"

"Only you what?"

"Well, you said there didn't seem to be much chance of buying the Wagon Tongues and I thought—"

"You thought maybe I'd back out and you'd have the deal to yourself, is that it?"

"Lily, what the devil ever gave you that idea?"

"I gave it to myself," she said. "I was thinking this morning that maybe *you'd* want to back out."

"Well, of course not—"

"Because if you do, just go ahead," she said quietly. "The more I think about this cattle business the more I like it."

He looked at her closely. "What's the matter?" he said quietly. "Don't you like the idea of Margaret Lacey and Milo getting friendly again?" He didn't miss the quick flush that stained her cheeks.

"Margaret Lacey?" she said. "I barely saw her." She stood up suddenly. "You better get ready if you're going to Belle's wedding."

"Sit down, Lily," he said.

She heard that rare authority that could come into his voice at times. She looked at him and his mouth was set and the nervousness was gone from his eyes.

"Well?"

"You don't get anything for nothing, Lily."

"That's not news to me."

"That valley out there," he said. "A big herd of cattle. It's a big thing; it might cost a big price."

"We can pay it if need be."

"Suppose it meant fighting for it?"

"I've had to fight for everything I've ever had," she said.

"That's right, Lily," he said. "So you have. If the going gets rough, don't forget it."

"Are you thinking I might run out on you?"

He smiled at her and stood up and took his beaver hat from the hook on the wall. "No," he said, "I wasn't thinking that." He came and stood by her and he bent suddenly and kissed her on the cheek. "You see, Lily," he said softly, "I love you too much to ever let you run out on me."

He reached down suddenly and jerked her to her feet and before she could turn her head he was kissing her, crushing her lips with his own. He shoved her away from him then and his eyes were hot and black.

"I love you so much," he said softly, "that I'd kill a man who came between us."

Chapter Twelve

A Trinket for a Lady

MILO rode into town slowly. He had taken off his mackinaw and tied it behind the saddle and he was wearing an old suit coat. It was unbuttoned and the gun on his hip was clearly visible. He rode down the street, his eyes traveling first to the marshal's office, then across to the Golden Lily. Both places seemed deserted.

He noticed the stores then and saw that they were closed. There was not a person on the streets anywhere and then he saw the rigs and saddle horses up by the church on the hill at the far end of town. A dozen or more men were standing around and as he watched he saw Sam and Wyoming come out on the porch of the church and glance down the street. They apparently didn't notice him. He rode up toward the church.

By the time he got there everyone was inside. He dismounted and tied his horse to the wheel of a buggy and he stood there a second. Using his teeth, he tugged the glove from his right hand and he flexed his fingers, then shifted his gun belt. With his left hand he removed his hat and stepped inside the church. It wasn't until then that he knew for sure that it was a wedding. Tommy Walker and Belle were kneeling in front of the altar.

At first no one saw him in the dim light and then Casey Beal, standing at

the rear of the church, glanced around. Casey made a small, animal-like sound in his throat and the color drained from his face. He started edging his way along the wall and Milo reached out and gripped his arm.

"Stick around, Casey," he said under his breath. "This is heaven and I'm an angel."

Casey started to whimper and a dozen heads turned and one of them was Lily's. He was looking directly into her eyes and he saw they were moist and her lips were half-parted and then Sam was looking at her, following her eyes. He saw Milo and he half rose.

"—And do you, Belle, take this man—"

So you didn't expect me, Sam, Milo thought. *Then you must have known—* Sam had turned and now he was staring straight ahead and there was too much tension in his shoulders.

"Milo, listen to me," Casey Beal said. Wyoming had pushed his way along the wall. He was standing by Casey now and he was smiling. He was smiling at Milo but he was standing close to Casey. Perspiration started on Casey's forehead and then he started moving along the wall toward the door and Wyoming moved along with him. Wyoming had Casey's arm twisted up behind his back.

The place was packed to the walls. Milo started to follow and a large woman got in his way and shoved at him when he tried to get by. "Shhhh," the woman said and she gave him a dirty scowl.

He pushed by her anyway and got to the door and Newt Tregor and Travis Mort were standing there, blocking the entrance.

"I now pronounce you man and wife—" There was a long sigh from the women in the church and Milo knew Tommy and Belle were kissing. He moved forward and Newt Tregor put his arm against the door jamb and leaned there.

After that he was part of the crowd. They were all pushing and shoving and making jokes and he looked up and Belle was there, radiantly beautiful, her eyes shining. Tommy Walker was trying to keep her arm and men were shoving him.

"Congratulations, Tommy," Milo said and he caught the grin of the big, blond kid who looked as if he had just been scrubbed with a brush.

"I'd like to ask you about them cows of mine sometime," Tommy managed to say.

"Why, Belle, I'd slap his face," one of Lily's girls said, "thinking of his cows at a time like this!"

Then they were all laughing and shoving and Milo was carried along with them, out into the yard. He tried to spot Wyoming and Casey Beal but he couldn't see them anywhere. He got to his horse finally but he had to lead the animal through the crowd and when he was mounted he had to ride slowly.

By the time he got away the men were pouring down the hill toward the Golden Lily and he moved along with them, searching every face, looking for Casey Beal. Whether or not Beal had been the one who tried to ambush him, Beal knew about it and Milo knew he could make him talk. He got down as far as the marshal's office and dismounted, tying his horse to the rail there, and he freed his gun in its holster before opening the door. The room was empty.

He went quickly into the back room and found that deserted and then he came back and he was standing there

by the desk when Sam Templin walked in, followed by Lily. Milo drew his gun and laid it on the desk.

"Sit down, Sam," he said. "I want to talk to you."

"Milo, I don't know what the hell you want—"

"Casey Beal," Milo said. "Got any idea where I can find him?"

"No."

"Then you'll do, Sam," Milo said. He reached up and removed his hat. The cut across the side of his head was wicked and raw. "It's about this, Sam."

He heard Lily give a little gasp, saw her start toward him, and then she was looking at Sam, her eyes wide, and she stopped and stood there between the two men.

Sam's face was white and he kept licking his lips. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"A bullet did that, Sam," Milo said. "Did Casey Beal figure this one out himself or did you give him the idea?"

"Casey was in town—"

"You're a better liar than that, Sam," Milo said. "I saw Casey, not ten minutes after this happened. He was standing up on the trail, looking for me."

"So help me God, Milo—"

"If you weren't who you are I'd kill you, Sam," Milo said softly. "You know that, don't you?"

All the fight went out of Sam Templin. He slouched into a chair and sat there with his head down. "I didn't have anything to do with it, Milo. You've got to believe that. You know that Casey hated you. He always has. He hated the way you shoved him around."

"All right, Sam," Milo said. "I'll talk to Casey about it." He walked across the room, jerked Sam to his feet, reached inside his coat, and removed the gun from the shoulder holster. He tossed the gun onto the desk, alongside his own. "Have you ever had a good beating, Sam?"

"Listen to me—"

"Maybe a beating is what you need," Milo said.

He reached out suddenly and slapped Sam hard across the face. Sam threw up his hands and Milo slapped him again. He felt Lily tugging at his arm and he turned swiftly and shoved her.

"Stay out of it, sister," he said, "or you'll get the same." He gripped Sam's coat, pulled him forward and hit him hard.

The blow knocked Sam back against the wall and for a second he stood there, a small trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth and then his eyes were hot with anger and he threw himself forward. Milo hit him as he was coming in.

Full rage and pain took hold of Sam and he lashed out wickedly, throwing rights and lefts. Some of them connected and Sam came boring in, blindly now, trying for the kill. Milo's fist caught him on the side of the head and staggered him and as he moved away Milo hit him again. Sam felt his knees buckling and he fought against it and then Milo had hold of his coat collar and was jerking him upright. Sam tried to protect his face but that fist kept lashing out at him, pounding his lips, his nose. He backed away finally, his arms over his face and he could hear Milo's heavy breathing.

"Maybe I should have done that a long time ago, Sam," Milo was saying. "When we were kids."

A pitcher of water sloshed into Sam's face. He could see Milo standing there, the empty pitcher in his hand.

"You're mixed up with the wrong

people, Sam," Milo said. "Wyoming—Travis Mort—Newt Tregor—Casey Beal. Maybe even Lily here, I don't know. Get rid of 'em. If you and Lily want to keep the saloon, that's all right, but unless you get rid of Wyoming and his gang I'm going to get rid of them for you. You've got three days to clean 'em out and then I'll be back and this beating is only a sample."

He took his gun from the desk and shoved it into the holster and went outside. Lily ran after him, calling his name. He swung into the saddle and she clung to his leg, looking up at him, pleading.

"Please, Milo, Sam had nothing to do with it."

He reached down and slapped her hand, hard, and he rode up toward the livery stable.

"Seen Casey Beal?" he said to the old man there.

"Not lately," the stableman said.

"Remember hard," Milo said.

"I told you I didn't see him."

Milo swung down from the saddle. He lifted the old man to his feet, jerking him momentarily off the ground, and he slammed him back against the wall, holding him there.

"Think again," he said.

"Damn it, Milo," the old man said, his eyes wide with terror and his mouth working.

"Which way'd he go?"

"Him and Wyoming and Travis and Newt took off out of here like four shots. I didn't see which way they went. Honest to hell, Milo, I didn't see. The folks was comin' down from the church—"

Milo released his grip. He reached into his pocket and took out a dollar which he tossed to the old man.

"Buy yourself a drink, Ab," he said. "It'll be good for your memory."

"Milo, Wyoming told me not to say nothin'."

Milo said, "I don't remember you saying anything."

He mounted and rode down the street and Lily was still standing there in front of the marshal's office. She called to him again and he ignored her and rode on to the general-merchandise store on the opposite side of the street.

Jenkins, the owner of the store, was lounging against a counter at the back of the cluttered room. There wasn't a customer in the place. Milo waved a curt greeting and walked straight back to the rear of the building where several watches hung on pegs on a black-velvet-covered board.

"Sell you a watch, Milo?"

"Not today," Milo said. "Let's see that brass jewelry you got."

Jenkins reached into the show case and took out a tray loaded with bracelets, necklaces, and inexpensive rings. He poked around experimentally with a forefinger.

"If it wasn't for Lily's girls," he said, "I'd quit stocking this stuff."

"That the best you got?" Milo said.

"For that price."

"I didn't say anything about price, did I?"

Jenkins winked. "Special girl, eh?"

"Very special," Milo said.

He didn't see Lily come into the store. She walked down along the counter and she was standing near him before he noticed her.

"I got some cameos," Jenkins said. "Real ones, too. They're pretty dear."

"Let's see 'em," Milo said.

Jenkins had to go to his safe and when he came back he had some really fine things—earrings with diamonds,

expensive bracelets with real stones, a selection of brooches.

"Sometimes," Jenkins said, "a man gets to thinking about the wife or gal he left back in Iowa or someplace and he gets a few too many drinks under his belt and then he wants to buy something nice. Leastwise they did when the claims were payin' out good."

"Let's see that one in the middle," Milo said.

Lily was standing close to him. "Milo, I have to talk to you—"

He held up the cameo brooch, turning it in his hand. It was a pretty thing, set in natural gold and instead of a chain it had a black velvet ribbon.

"I'll take that," he said.

"It's ten dollars," Jenkins said.

"Wrap it up pretty, will you?" Milo said. "It's a gift." He tossed a ten-dollar gold piece on the counter.

"You bet," Jenkins said.

Lily Devore stood there watching while Jenkins wrapped the brooch. She kept looking at Milo and she kept thinking of Margaret Lacey and the old fire started building inside her.

"I hope she likes the trinket," she said, and the bitterness was there in her voice. "All ten dollars' worth of it."

Milo Stuart looked at her. "This trinket is for a lady, Lily girl," he said. "The kind of a lady that doesn't look for the dollar sign on a man's back."

He took the small package and left the store and she stood there, watching him, and she could see him mount his horse and ride out of sight. There was an embarrassed cough from Jenkins.

She turned on the storekeeper. "How much do you owe me, Jenkins?"

Jenkins was taken by surprise. He coughed nervously and fiddled with his sateen sleeve guards. "I'd have to look it up, Lily. About five thousand, I guess—"

"Can you pay it right now?"

"Right now?" Jenkin's voice was a thin squeak. "Lily, the boys are all out of work up at the Bucket, and the Bluebonnet is closing down tomorrow."

"Do me a favor, Jenkins."

"Sure, Lily, anything."

"If Margaret Lacey or anyone working for her comes in here don't give them any credit."

"Gosh, Lily, it's pretty hard not to give credit—"

"These are cattle people and they're a poor risk. I've got a right to protect my investment. I said no credit."

"All right, Lily, if that's what you say."

"And nothing for cash, either."

"Lily, you can't do that!"

"I said nothing for cash, didn't I?" The tears were spilling over and running down her cheeks and she was leaning forward toward him, her lips tight against her teeth. "Either that or pay up what you owe me right now!"

"Lily, I never heard you talk like this before—"

"Well, you're hearing me now," she said. She ran outside and Jenkins stood there, scratching his head.

She ran down the street, the tears blinding her, and she collided with Sam Templin just coming out of the barbershop where he had had his cuts touched up with alum. He caught her in his arms and held her away and then she had her arms around his neck and she was sobbing on his chest.

"You *are* in love with him." Sam's voice was low and she felt the rumble of his words, rather than heard them. She pushed herself away quickly but he held her by the shoulders. "You're

in love with him, aren't you?"

"Suppose I am?"

"I told you," he said. "I told you I'd kill a man who came between us."

The tears were gone now and her gaze was level, meeting his gaze. She twisted away from him and her voice was as cold as raw steel.

"The only man who can come between us, Sam," she said quietly, "is a dead man. Just remember that."

She pushed past him and went on to the Golden Lily and Sam stood there, feeling the sting of the bruises on his face, and at the end of the street he saw Milo turn into the canyon trail.

THE sound of the creek was thick in Milo's ears and he saw the deserted claims and up on the hill men were grouped around the mouth of the tunnel of the Bluebonnet Mine. Unemployed men. He reached back and untied his mackinaw from in back of his saddle and worked his arms into the sleeves. Now that he was alone his head was paining miserably and the lack of sleep was like a dead weight on his eyelids.

A little longer, he told himself. *Just a little longer—*

He cut to his left at the bottom of the slope that led up to the ridge and forded the creek at a gravel bar. A mile down the canyon he came to the first of the grassy meadows, a series of little valleys that increased in size and opened finally onto the big valley itself.

He sat here and looked at this cowman's paradise stretching out for a distance of five miles or so to the mountains. North and south the valley twisted and turned for a distance of thirty miles and the entire floor of it, cut by a dozen streams, was belly-high with grass. There was room here for four or five good-size spreads—not cattle kingdoms, but substantial ranches where a man could raise and up-breed his stock. A fence across the valley, another one five or six miles up, a dividing fence down the middle to separate summer and winter pastures and a man could be his own god.

There was already the one outfit down at the south end—Elmer Hammer, the Texas man. Tommy Walker's little place was north, about four miles out of Oro. That left the entire middle of the valley to the Wagon Tongue outfit, with the exception of the graze Milo would claim. He had already decided on a small side valley opposite the Walker spread.

He rode on and came to the main stream that twisted down the middle of the valley. Beyond the stream he saw the Wagon Tongue herd, grazing as peacefully as if they had been here all their lives. Down the valley in the protection of a draw that carried a small stream from the mountains the two wagons were pulled up side by side and there was a sizable fire going. He rode up the creek and in a little wide spot in the canyon he found his own cattle.

He circled his herd slowly, looking for one particular heifer—a roan Durham of especially good breeding. Slowly then he reined his horse into the herd, pointing its nose toward the heifer. In a matter of seconds he had the thrill of feeling the horse take over and from then on he rode, letting the horse do the work.

Slowly the horse approached the

heifer, then with a sudden move it was between the heifer and the rest of the herd. The horse pressed close to the cow, forcing it toward the edge of the valley, away from the other cattle. So carefully had it moved that the other cattle grazed on undisturbed.

But once it saw it was being completely separated the heifer had a different idea. It wheeled suddenly, tail high, and started back. The horse had anticipated the move and cut across in front of the cow, turning it back. The cow bolted in the opposite direction, but both man and horse were ready for the move. Milo was leaning, the horse was turning, and this time the horse overtook the cow and nipped her on the rump with his teeth. The heifer bawled and started out on a clumsy lope, the horse keeping right behind her, guiding her with his head first on one side of her rump, then on the other. Milo reached down and patted his horse's shoulder.

The sun was round in the west and a small breeze made a sea of the grass. Across the valley the freshly blanketed mountains were pink with sun and below the peaks the shrouded pines were majestic with snow. Milo Stuart stood in his stirrups and inhaled until he thought his lungs would burst.

"And people want to know what's in the cattle business," he said aloud. He touched his horse's flanks. "Up the river," he said. "That heifer's a present for a mighty nice feller."

It was nearly dark when he came to Tommy Walker's place at the head of the valley. The buckboard was there in the yard and someone had tied a pair of old shoes to the rear axle. Milo smiled and he drove the heifer into the yard. A dog ran out and barked at him. Walker came to the door, a big, clean-cut man with wide blue eyes. Milo leaned his hands on his saddle horn.

"A wedding present for you, Tom," he said. "Shall I turn her in the corral or just let her roam?"

"My gosh, Stuart," Walker said, his ears coloring. "There was no call for you to do that—"

"Might we better keep her penned up for a day or so," Milo said. "Might she wander back to my herd."

He saw Belle come to the door and stand by her husband, her arm linking through his.

"Milo," she said.

He rode his horse over by the door and reached the little package out of his shirt pocket and handed it down to her.

"Should of sent you something before," he said, "but there wasn't time." He saw her eyes light and she stood there holding the package, looking up at him.

"Gosh, honey," Tommy Walker said. "We could at least ask the man to step down and set a spell."

"You could but you won't," Milo said, grinning. He saw the blush color Belle's cheeks and he liked it. He reined his horse and for a second he sat there, grinning at them. "I reckon we'll be neighbors," he said finally. "I broke with Sam and Lily. Figure on running my cows south of you here."

Tommy Walker walked over and offered his hand. "I never got to know you good, Stuart," he said, "but I never found nothing about you to dislike none. Glad to have you for a neighbor."

Milo took the big hand and felt the sincere pressure of it. "Reckon you folks got things to talk about," he said. "I'll see you later."

He reined abruptly and rode away

and the sun dropped behind the peaks, sending the blue shadows racing across the valley. He cut up the canyon and took the trail back to his cabin in the little grazed-out valley and he rode down the slope with the moon.

The ice had melted in the center of the pond during the day and now with night the beavers were working in the willows, laying in more branches for the winter. The mark of the herd was everywhere. The cabin was cold and deserted. He entered it and built a fire and fried up the scant remains of the venison steaks.

He sat there alone then, eating, thinking of Belle and Tommy, thinking of his own past and of dreams that had gone astray. In time sleep claimed him and he made his bed on the bunk where Glen Lacey had died and he slept the clock around.

Chapter Thirteen

Closed for Good

SUNRISE came into the valley with startling suddenness. The peaks picked up the first light and held it for a moment and then threw it down into the flats, a blaze of red and gold. In the cabin Milo Stuart slept until he felt the press of the day against his eyelids and then he awoke with an old alertness that he hadn't felt for years. He had dreamed of Casey Beal and of Sam Templin and Sam had been saying, "I'm your brother, I'm your brother—" He got up and stirred up the coals in the fireplace and put on more wood.

When he had first found this valley he had dreaded the thoughts of ever leaving it, but now that the time had come he was anticipating it with pleasure. It was as if he had thought of the big valley all along—a place where a man could build a real ranch and grow. He made coffee and fried the last of his venison and as he worked around the fire he remembered the Walkers and how they had looked, standing there in the doorway of their cabin.

When it came right down to it, he decided, a man's worth could be measured by mighty little things. Perhaps that had been his mistake—thinking that he had to have a larger herd, thinking that he had to be the head marshal instead of just a deputy. As he thought back on it he realized that Margaret had never demanded those things. They had been within himself.

And that, perhaps, was the trouble with Sam and Lily. No one had ever pointed out to them the real measures of life. They had taken money as their god and ignored all else and now they had reached a place where it was hard for them to turn back.

There was little enough to pack in the cabin. The frying pan, the coffeepot, a tin plate and a few knives, a fork and a spoon. The few canned goods that had been stored here had been used up the night before. He found a gunny sack and was able to put his things into that, then making a roll of his blankets he packed them outside and closed the door for the last time.

By ten o'clock in the morning he was back on the slope where he could look down on his little herd in the canyon where they had been cut out of the main Wagon Tongue herd. It gave him a sense of security, looking down on them, knowing that a few miles to the north were the Walkers, neighbors

who would accept him. For a moment trouble seemed a long way off and then he was remembering Sam and Casey Beal and the others—and that night in Oregon when he had killed Margaret Lacey's brother. He rode down the slope and again his gun was part of him, a thing he hated, a thing that had shaped his life.

He told himself that it was an accident that took him to the hill directly above the Wagon Tongue camp, but as he sat there, looking down on the small activity, he knew it was more than that.

A fire was going between the two wagons and he could see the two women working there. The remuda was free now, grazing in a bunch along the central stream, and the cattle had spread across the valley. The delayed ring of an ax floated through the thin, cold air, the sound of Terry Crawford working on wood for the fire. He envied the man that closeness to Margaret and was ashamed of his envy.

He was being a child, he knew, sitting here, spying on people—and yet if those people could only know how much he wanted to be a part of them! That was the trouble, he supposed. He had never been a part of any group except that intangible group of men who won a reputation with a gun. And that group, he knew, was the most lonesome group in the world. He slacked his reins and let his horse graze.

In time he was aware of the increased activity in the Wagon Tongue camp—men saddling horses, packing their scanty gear. He watched with increased interest and knew that the four trail hands, Rip, Fenton, Boles, and Nizic, were getting ready to leave. He wanted to ride down there and tell Margaret that she was making a mistake—that she would need these hands to help with the building of a cabin, that she would need them more if Sam Templin went ahead with his plans of taking over the valley. Knowing that any advice he would give would go unheeded, he sat there and saw the four men ride away, pausing on the rise above the camp to wave good-by.

They'd go to Oro, those four, to have a well deserved fling at the end of the trail. And Sam and Lily would see them and realize that now there was even less opposition in their way. He decided then that he had to see Margaret, had to make her see that he wanted to help her, make her see that a man could suffer over a mistake as much as a woman could— He gathered his reins and started riding down the slope.

There was a canyon between the hill and the camp and for a half hour or more he was out of sight of the activity there below him. During that time, when he could no longer see her, his convictions weakened and he thought of turning back, but the five years of remembering her were too strong. He had to see her, talk to her. He rode up the wall of the canyon and the camp was there, not over five hundred yards below him. He reined up in a thicket of cedar and he saw Clete Benson and Terry Crawford mount their horses and ride out into the valley. He felt like a fool, skulking around this way.

It was a half hour before he saw Margaret leave the camp and then his heart was beating like a schoolboy's. He dismounted and tied his horse and he watched her walking up the little stream that ran through the canyon. He saw her pause to pick some fern, saw her move on and stop to dip water in the cup of her hand at the foot of a

waterfall. In time she came to the pool that was directly below him and for a long time she stood there, looking at her reflection, perhaps, and then she picked up a flat stone and skipped it across the surface of the water.

He started down the bank, walking cautiously, placing each step, and he was down on the flat and behind her before she looked up. He spoke her name softly.

"Margaret. Don't be afraid—"

She didn't look around at first. She stood there, staring down at the pool and then she turned and met his eyes.

"I'm not afraid, Milo," she said. "I never have been afraid of you."

The million words that had been in his mind for five years were suddenly gone. This was not a vision; this was the real thing and the words that could be said in those moments between sleep and wakefulness were not the words one said by the side of a pool in the light of noon.

"I'm sorry about your dad," he said. "I'm sorry I couldn't do more—"

There was a rock there at the edge of the pool and now she sat down and she wasn't looking at him. She was looking across the stream, into the small conifer thicket, into the years.

"You did what you could," she said. "There was no one could do much for Dad. I know. I tried."

He remembered how proud Glen Lacey had been of his son; how, regardless of what Bert did, the old man would laugh and say that a kid must have his fling. He knew how Glen Lacey had wanted sons above all else. Margaret had told him that and she had told him of her own loneliness.

"I want to tell you about Bert," he said. "I've wanted to tell you for five years."

"There's nothing to tell," she said. "I know Bert was wild. I know you were doing your job. Perhaps it was my fault that you did your job as completely as you did."

"Margaret, look at me."

She turned slowly and the eyes were the same, blue and somehow sad, and the hair was the same, that blond honey of a wheat field, and the lips were full and red and as ripe as the wild strawberries on the slopes of the Blues in Oregon.

"I don't hate you, Milo," she said softly. "Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"More than anything in the world."

"I tried to hate you," she said. "For a while perhaps I did. By hating you I could be closer to Dad."

"I still love you," he said. "You must know that."

"Do you, Milo?"

"Of course I do!"

He moved toward her swiftly and took her in his arms and she did not try to resist him. Five years of longing were in him and he put his hand against her forehead and smoothed her hair and then his lips found hers and he kissed her. After a long time he let her go and she sat there looking into his eyes, and he knew the kiss had meant nothing to either of them.

"I love you," he said. She shook her head.

"No, Milo," she said, "you don't love me." He started to speak and she put the palm of her hand against his lips. "You don't love me and I don't love you, because we don't even know each other."

"Margaret—"

"Once, a long time ago," she said, "there was another Margaret, very young, and there was another Milo.

Those two loved each other, perhaps, and perhaps they didn't. Perhaps they were only lonesome."

He believed what she was saying and he didn't want to believe it. He wanted to kiss her again, prove that she was wrong, but suddenly she was a stranger.

"I looked at you the other night," she said, "standing there in the door of your cabin." She smiled. "Do you think you are the only one that remembered that we used to talk about a cabin of our own?"

"But if you remember like that—"

"Of course I remember," she said. "I wanted you to kiss me just now. I've dreamed about you kissing me just once again."

"Then you still love me?"

"Of course not, Milo. We're old enough that we ought to know that now."

He thought of Lily Devore and how she had told him that the fire couldn't be rekindled, once it was out. Time. That was the trouble. Time, the enemy of love.

"We thought we had something that no one else had ever experienced," she said, "and it wasn't so, though it was to us at the time. And this remembering?" She smiled that sad little smile that had haunted his dreams so long. "That isn't new with us either, Milo. I don't suppose there is a person in the world that doesn't look back sometime and remember some one person. *If I could only hold that one again,* they think. *If I could only feel those lips the way I felt them once—*"

She picked up a small stone and tossed it into the pool and the ripples spread and fractured themselves on the mossy bank. "I've thought that, Milo—a thousand times. If you and I could only be alone once more— I've thought that even when I was planning to kill you. If we could be alone—" She stood up suddenly and dusted the wet sand from her hands. "Well, Milo, we're alone."

And that was the answer more completely than a thousand words could have told it. They were there together, alone, and the sound of a stream was a thing that could be heard and the wind was in the pines and it could be felt upon their cheeks. There was no magic here. There were only two people, people who had grown old and had changed in the short span of five years— He looked at her and smiled and offered his hand.

"Margaret, I'd like to be your friend," he said.

She didn't take his hand. "Someday," she said, "perhaps you can be. It isn't easy to forget we haven't been."

He looked at her and he was looking at a stranger and he thought of Lily Devore and of how he could always be himself with Lily— Lily Devore—

LILY had hired a horse at the stable and ridden out of town, sick of the Golden Lily, sick of Sam, sick of the town of Oro. She had been awake most of the night, thinking of Milo, and now she had reached a decision. Why should she let pride stand in her way? Why shouldn't she ride out and see him and tell him she loved him?

Lily Devore reined in at the top of a knoll and she could look down on the Wagon Tongue camp. Mrs. Lacey was there alone.

She rode into the canyon, following the track of a horse that had crossed over beyond Milo's herd. It must be Milo's horse, she had decided. He must be near here. The track of the horse

led down into the canyon and was plainly fresh in the soggy slope on the other side. She rode that way and when she was at the top of the hill she could look down at the stream where it formed a pool at the foot of the waterfall.

She saw them then, standing together at the edge of the pool, standing close together, and she saw Margaret Lacey look at Milo Stuart and she saw Milo take the girl in his arms. For a moment she sat there, feeling the complete emptiness of defeat, and then a sob caught in her throat and she jerked the reins of the hired horse and kicked its ribs with her heels. The horse jumped, nearly unseating her, and then it was in a gallop and she was heading back toward town.

"I'M GLAD we talked, Margaret," Milo Stuart said.

"We had to, someday," she said. "I'm sorry for everything that's happened, but it can't be changed now."

"Did you hear a horse?" he said suddenly.

"It might have been Clete or Terry," she said. She looked at him and she wasn't smiling. "You can't expect Terry to like you."

"I suppose not, Margaret," Milo said.

He left her and went back up the slope and got his horse and on the ridge beyond him he saw a rider. For a moment he stood there, staring, but the rider was gone. He could have sworn it was a woman.

THE pound of the hoofbeats rang in Lily Devore's ears. *She can't have him*, they said. *She can't have him—*

She slashed the animal with the ends of her reins and the sharp cut of the wind was in her face, stinging her nostrils, and it tore her hair loose and whipped it around her face.

She can't have him— The outskirts of the town of Oro were rushing out at her from the end of the trail.

She didn't deliver the horse to the stable but dismounted instead in front of the Golden Lily and she ran inside, leaving the reins of the horse trailing. She nearly collided with Wyoming in the doorway. He put out his arm and stopped her.

"What's the rush, girlie?" His arm slipped around her shoulder.

It was the first time he had ever touched her. She jerked away, surprised, angry, and she saw the thin face leering down at her. She slapped him, hard, and the smile never left his lips and she was suddenly afraid of him and she realized she had never feared another man in her life. She tried to push past him and he stopped her again with his arm.

"Get out of my way!"

"You got a lot of fire, girlie," Wyoming said. "I like a girlie with a lot of fire. You and me ought to get along right well."

"I'll have you fired!"

"You wanta bet, girlie?" Wyoming said. He dropped his arm and she saw the marshal's shield on his vest. Wyoming took a toothpick from his pocket and sucked on it noisily.

"See you, girlie," he said, and he dropped his arm.

She caught up her skirts and ran the length of the room to Sam's office, barely conscious of the fact that the saloon was empty.

Sam was standing behind his desk. His face was pasty-white and he was staring straight ahead. He looked as if he were deathly sick.

"Sam!" she said quickly. "What's

the matter with you?"

"The Bluebonnet closed down an hour ago," he said. He wasn't looking at her. He was staring out into space.

Her breath caught in her throat and she felt the terrible vacantness of fear in her chest. "They'll open in the spring," she said. "There's a thousand miners in the creeks—"

"They've closed for good, Lily," he said. "The men are deserting the claims along the creeks like flies. At least five hundred left town already today."

She sat down weakly. Just this morning she had left the town and everything was normal, just as it had been. A little more talk about the diggings petering out, perhaps, but that was miner talk. They always talked that way—

"It isn't so, Sam."

"I wish to God it wasn't."

She sat there silently for a long time and then she got up and opened the door and looked out into the main room of the deserted saloon. The gambling-tables were covered, the stage at the end of the room empty. She thought of how she had worked to build this up, all the money it had taken, the endless hours of labor. She stood up and her face was pale and drawn and the lines around her mouth were hard.

"How much money do we have, Sam?"

He sat down then and buried his face in his hands. "Two or three thousand," he said. "No more cash than that."

"But we must have!"

"On paper, yes. We've financed every business in town. We put half our money into stock in the Bucket and Bluebonnet. We've grubstaked half the miners on the creeks. We own the building here, and the fixtures."

"Then we'll collect," she said. "We'll start collecting now!"

He reached into his pocket and took out a twenty-dollar gold piece and he tossed it on the desk. "Your friend Emil was by. He said to thank you and give you this. He said if he struck it rich someplace he'd try to send you more."

"Emil's gone?"

"With his wife and kid," Sam said. "What little stuff he owned was in a wheelbarrow. His wife was pushing it and Emil was carrying the kid."

She got up and walked out through the saloon and she walked as if she were in a dream. Already a feeling of death was descending over the once boisterous town. Men stood in little groups and talked quietly, as if not wanting to disturb the silence. A man stopped in front of her and held his hat in his hand.

"Lily," the man said, "I'd sure like to square up with you if I could, but I just ain't got it."

She didn't show that she heard him and after a little while he put on his hat and picked up a bundle that was there on the porch of the saloon. He slung the bundle over his shoulder and started walking down the middle of the street.

"Rough, girlie, ain't it?" It was Wyoming. He had moved up beside her and he was standing there, his shoulder blade against the door jamb. The toothpick was dangling from the corner of his mouth, the marshal's badge was on his vest.

"Course, now," he said, "if a body was in the cow business, maybe. That's a pretty permanent thing. Injuns to be fed, Army to supply— Good Oregon

beef brings a smart price in Chicago." He stretched and yawned.

"How much, Wyoming?" Sam Templin was standing there behind them. His shirt collar was open, his hair rumpled. There was a wild light in his eyes and his gaze kept boring into Wyoming.

Wyoming shifted his gun belt. "It might be rough," he said. "That Milo Stuart is a good fightin' man—"

"I asked you how much?" Sam Templin said.

"Three thousand cash," Wyoming said.

"Sam!" Lily's voice was high-pitched. "What are you talking about?"

"Go to hell, Wyoming," Sam Templin said. "It's too much."

Wyoming shrugged. "All right, Templin," he said. "Handle your own job. Me and Travis and Newt know where we can get a job. Herdin' sheep. There's a cowman friend of ours wants these sheep herded over a bluff. He pays cash money, Templin. He ain't yellow like you."

Sam stepped forward, his fist cocked, and Wyoming's hand dropped and half lifted the gun from its holster.

"Behave, Sam," Wyoming said quietly. "Don't be nervous like Casey Beal was." He reached up with his left hand and rubbed his palm across the marshal's badge.

"Two thousand," Sam Templin said.

"I reckon you heard me, all right," Wyoming said. "Guns come high. You ought to know that. You didn't have enough to hire your own foster brother. That's why he walked out on you. You didn't raise the ante high enough. Everybody's got a price."

A sweeping dizziness gripped Lily Devore and she had to clutch at the porch pillar for support. "Get out!" she said fiercely. "You and Travis Mort and Newt Tregor—get out!"

"Now, girlie," Wyoming said, "when I taken this job here in Oro one of the understandin's was that I was workin' fer Sam here, not fer you."

"Twenty-five hundred," Sam Templin said.

"Sam!" Lily said. "Are you crazy? You can't hire guns to fight Milo!"

"Because you're in love with him?" Sam Templin said.

"Sam, be reasonable—"

"You went out to see him this morning, didn't you? You didn't think I knew where you went."

"I didn't see him, Sam. Sam, listen to me! You can't fight Milo—"

"When can you get started, Wyoming?" Sam Templin said.

"As soon as I see the color of your money," Wyoming said.

"Come on inside," Sam said. "I think I've got enough cash. If I haven't, my partner has got a diamond necklace that will more than make up the difference."

"Your partner has got a lot of things," Wyoming said. He reached out and chucked Lily under the chin. "Just a hell of a lot of things."

Chapter Fourteen

Night Attack

IT WAS going to be a long look, maybe, with little to go on, but Milo Stuart had made up his mind to find Casey Beal. Riding south in the valley now, scanning the ground for the track of the horses, he felt the old, familiar tug of the man hunt strong on him and he wondered if he would ever

be able to shake it.

He had back-tracked, starting just after noon, cutting the trail above the Walker place as the most likely way Wyoming, Mort, Tregor, and Casey had left town. For an hour he had crossed and recrossed the trail, finding nothing, and then he had hit this little-used trail that skirted the valley and he had found the tracks of four horses. There was nothing, of course, to assure him that the four horses were ridden by the men he wanted, but it was something to follow.

The trail ran up into the hills for a couple of miles and then, in a thicket of chokecherry, it came to an abrupt break. The ground was torn here as if horses had milled around a great deal, perhaps startled. The brush was broken where the horses had been tied and there were a half-dozen cigarette butts on the ground where men had stood and talked. The tracks of three horses were perfectly plain, leading up the slope, back toward town. The track of one horse, apparently at a full gallop, led south, down the valley. It was this track Milo followed.

His reasoning had been that even if Casey Beal hadn't been the one who tried to dry-gulch him he certainly knew who did it. Casey, for all his size and his boasting, was a coward at heart. He hadn't acted like a guilty man there at the church. He had acted just plain scared.

So that left Wyoming, Travis Mort, and Newt Tregor, and of those three Wyoming was by far the most logical one. Wyoming was a professional gunman. Milo had told Sam that, a long time back, and he had told him again within the last few days, but Sam had shrugged it off.

"Maybe he was," Sam had said. "He isn't now. He's a dealer who can double as a bouncer, just like Mort and Newt, and he's mighty good at both jobs."

"Just watch your back if anyone wants to pay enough to get rid of you," Milo had said.

He didn't like thinking of Wyoming in connection with this attempted ambush because invariably it brought him back to the suspicion that Sam had hired the job done. He couldn't believe it because he didn't want to believe it, and yet it kept hammering at him, over and over. He had to find Casey Beal and then he would know. Casey would talk. Any man would talk if you worked on him hard enough.

The trail became extremely erratic, as if the horse had stopped to graze, then trotted for a while, then walked, then grazed again. It was an amazing way to ride for a man who was scared enough to run— A slow conviction began to build in Milo's mind. This horse was riderless.

He thought first of turning back, retracing his way to the chokecherry thicket, but he had gone far south now and it was getting late. Across the valley about a mile and a half away he could see the smoke of Elmer Hammer's place. He had never been down to the Texan's spread before. He had never liked the man particularly and the fact that he had put Hammer in jail a couple of times didn't exactly lead to neighborly exchanges. Hammer was all right when he was sober. A bit surly, a little queer, maybe, but all right.

Milo decided he would follow the trail a mile more and then, if he hadn't spotted the horse, he would turn in at Hammer's place. Queer or not, the man wouldn't be able to refuse a meal and

a place to sleep.

He jumped a dozen of Hammer's cattle, longhorn Texas stock as wild as antelope, and at one place he saw where Hammer had started a rail fence and never finished it. A cockleburr outfit at best. Odd how a ranch always looked a lot like the man who owned it.

It was getting dusk and now with the cattle tracks and the tracks of other horses it became impossible to follow the trail any longer. He reined to the left and cut across a patch where Hammer had mowed meadow hay and he came to the log barn and pole corral that set a hundred yards or so from Hammer's log-and-sod house. There were a dozen fairly good-looking horses in the corral. Milo looked them over carefully and rode on to the house.

Elmer Hammer was standing in the doorway, a shotgun resting in the crook of his arm. He was a pinch-faced, squint-eyed man who wore a short-cropped beard, black and curly. He stared straight at Milo without giving a word of greeting. Milo pulled up and folded his hands on the saddle horn.

"Evenin', Hammer," he said pleasantly. "Seen Casey Beal around?"

Hammer's eyes shifted nervously and he tilted the shotgun and let it slide forward until his hand could grip the stock.

"No, I ain't," he said. "Why?"

Milo nodded his head toward the corral. "His horse is out there."

"You know all the horses in this part of the country, maybe?" Hammer said.

"I know that one," Milo said. "Where's Beal?"

Hammer had a good grip on the shotgun now. "I told you I ain't seen him, didn't I? You makin' me out a liar?"

"Not unless you want me to," Milo said. "If he isn't here how come his horse is here?"

"I ain't said his horse is here," Hammer said.

"Don't give me no trouble, Hammer," Milo said quietly. "There's some say you got a way of finding horses easy. I don't want to believe it unless I have to."

"Damn you, Stuart," Hammer said. "You're always a-ridin' me. Just because you got a tin badge on your shirt you think you can ride a man."

Milo had forgotten that this man would still think of him as a lawman. He took advantage of the mistake. "Unless you got a better explanation than you give me I reckon I'll have to take you in, Hammer."

The shotgun started to move up and it stopped suddenly. The barrel of Milo's six-shooter was lying across the saddle horn, pointing directly at Hammer's chest.

The man in the doorway started to sweat. "I don't know how come that horse to be here," he said. "It come runnin' in without no saddle or bridle. That used to be my horse. I sold it to Casey not more than two weeks ago. I reckon it got loose and come home. Damn you, Stuart, you ain't gonna hang no hoss-thief charge on me."

"I don't intend to," Milo said. He had holstered his gun. "Couldn't if I wanted to, matter of fact. I gave up the lawman job a few days back. Casey Beal's marshal now."

Hammer didn't know whether to believe it or not. He stood there, shifting from one foot to the other, and finally said, "Well, it's the God's truth I'm tellin' you. The horse come runnin' in here not more than two hour ago. If

you want to take him back to Beal, go ahead and take him, or else tell Beal to come and get him."

"You got any other horses for sale, Hammer?"

The horse trader in Hammer was quick to come to the surface. "Might have," he said. "Why?"

"I moved a few cows in up at the other end of the valley. I'd like to get ahold of two or three good horses."

"You can go to hell," Hammer said flatly. "You and your brother both. You figger you can move into this valley and take over, just the way you did there in town."

"If you're talking about Sam Templin, he isn't my brother."

"Same thing to it," Hammer said. "He had me throwed out of that saloon of his and you was the one done the throwin' and you can't deny it. Then he comes to me all honey-butter-like and wants to buy me out. Twenty dollars a head for my cows, he offers me."

"The only time I ever threw you out of the Golden Lily you had it coming, Hammer. You were drunk and bothering the girls. As for any offer to buy your place, I don't know anything about it."

"You sure as hell talk a smooth speech, don't you, Stuart?" Hammer said. "Now get off my place before I forget my manners and cut loose on you. I got my supper to get."

"How about sleeping in your barn tonight?" Milo said.

"I don't let nobody sleep in my barn," Hammer said. "I told you to get out."

Milo felt like getting down and cuffing some sense into the belligerent Texan but he knew that would accomplish nothing. As much as possible, he needed this man's co-operation, if not his friendship. There would be a time when there would have to be a round-up of all the stock in the valley and being on the outs with Hammer wouldn't help matters. He forced a grin.

"Drop up my way sometime, Hammer," he said. "I'll show you how to be neighborly."

Elmer Hammer slammed the door and Milo heard him rattling pots and pans. *A little crazy*, Milo thought, and he let it go at that.

He rode back the way he had come, sorry now that he had made the long trip, convinced that he should have spent more time looking around the chokecherry thicket. He doubted seriously that Casey had deliberately turned his horse loose this way just to throw a tracker off the trail, but it might have been the case. He rolled a cigarette and lit it and the match flared in the darkness. Immediately afterward came the first shot.

It came from the grove of lodgepole pines directly in back of Hammer's house. Milo's horse shied and he tightened his grip on the reins and there was another shot, a yell from the house. The moon was behind the high peaks and the light wasn't strong enough for a man to see any distance. There were muzzle flashes—a dozen of them—and then the deep boom of the shotgun. Hammer was fighting back.

Milo reined his horse and sank his spurs and as he headed back he reached down and jerked the Winchester carbine from the boot that hung in front of his right leg. He levered in a shell and rode straight back toward the cabin. A bullet screamed dangerously close to his ear and he reined around and threw himself from the saddle and dropped behind the partial-

ly completed rail fence. A bullet thudded into a rail not three feet from where he had hidden himself.

He raised up on one knee and started firing into the grove of pines, firing blind, just hoping to bring someone out into the open. He hadn't seen a horse or a man but the firing was going on steadily and now as he listened he realized it came from two guns—a rifle and a pistol, it sounded like. At intervals of thirty seconds or so the shotgun would boom from inside the cabin.

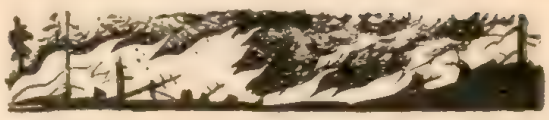
Fool! Milo thought. *Don't you have a rifle? What the hell good is that birdshot at that distance?*

There was the sound of a gate being opened and out by the corral there were two pistol shots in rapid succession. Horses squealed and Milo could hear them charging against the fence and then they found the gate and they were running. The shotgun boomed again and out there in the corral a man cursed loudly. It was impossible to recognize the voice. The shotgun boomed again and then it was quiet.

From the grove of pines there was an increased tempo of fire and in a moment the strategy of it was apparent. There was only a flicker of flame at first, then a yellow tongue of it as the hay in the barn caught fire. Milo caught a glimpse of a heavy-set man—it could have been Newt Tregor. He snapped a shot but knew he had missed. The flame caught and in no time the shakes were afire.

Until now there had been a light in the cabin. It was snuffed out suddenly, whether by a bullet or by Hammer there was no way of telling. The gunfire in the grove had ceased, as if the raiders had accomplished their purpose in firing the barn.

The circle of firelight spread and a



voice called from the grove, "Hurry it up, damn it!" It sounded as if the voice were disguised behind a folded handkerchief.

The cabin was in darkness but the glow from the barn was spreading rapidly, the dancing reflection of it darting out, revealing objects in sharp relief, retreating again. Once it touched the front of the cabin for just a second and Milo saw that the front door was wide open.

He realized then that the raiders in the grove couldn't see the front of the house, but only the end nearest them. It set on an angle so that the front door would be partially concealed. Elmer Hammer wasn't such a fool, after all! He had slipped out and if he could keep out of the fireglow he might be able to make an escape. There was one way to help, Milo figured. He laid his rifle across the top rail of the fence and started levering and firing as fast as he could make the mechanism work.

There was a token answer of gunfire from the grove, nothing more. Once, when the flames were high, Milo saw Elmer Hammer crawling on all fours out through the hayfield. He looked like a grotesque beetle. The rifle was empty. Milo drew his six-shooter and fired four times and then he took time to load the rifle. It was a .44-40 and it used the same shells as his six-shooter.

The precaution was needless, however. The raiders had done their job and now they were apparently perfectly willing to call it quits. Milo could hear the creak of saddle leather, the exchange of voices, and then the sound

of horses being spurred hard. The riders were heading up into the canyon and once back into the hills there would be a hundred places for them to hide. It would be useless to try to follow them.

He waited until he was sure they were gone and then he stood up. The barn was blazing fiercely now and he walked out into the light of it, the rifle in his hand.

"Hammer!" he called. "It's all right. They've gone." He waited for an answer and got none. "Hammer! Come on and give me a hand and maybe we can save something out of the barn!" Still no answer.

He became worried, fearing that Hammer had been hit and was lying out there, too weak to answer. He walked out in the direction of where he thought he last saw the man and he started walking in circles, calling out. He had left his horse over by the rail fence and now he heard the animal nicker softly.

"Hammer!" he called. His voice echoed back and forth across the valley and the only sound was the roar of the fire in the barn. *Damn the man,* Milo thought. *He might be right here under my feet—* He remembered the lamp in the cabin and he snapped his fingers. Hammer would have some coal oil someplace. He would find a gunny sack or a piece of blanket if necessary and make himself a torch.

He started toward the house on a run and he heard the commotion over by the rail fence. His horse snorted and then grunted as if kicked hard. Milo broke his stride, stopped, and turned that way. He saw his horse wheel and break into a dead run, straight up the valley trail. There was a man in the saddle. A man who rode low, like an Indian. Milo gave a bellow of rage and then threw his rifle into the crook of his arm and pulled the trigger. He aimed way high—almost ten feet over the rider's head.

"Wait a minute, damn you!" The moon came across the tops of the peaks and he could see the rider slashing with the reins, one side and then the other. There was little doubt that the rider was Elmer Hammer.

Why, you spooked, half-witted, son of a— He levered the empty shell from the rifle, caught it, and threw it on the ground. *The crazy damn jackass, didn't he hear me calling to him?*

So he was stranded, a good fifteen miles from where he had intended to be, on foot. In spite of the anger that was in him he couldn't help see the humor of Elmer Hammer, crawling around out there in the dark, sneaking up on Milo's horse while Milo was looking for him.

"I'll get even with you, damn you," Milo said to himself. "I'll have that supper I planned on having and I'll sleep in your bed."

He walked toward the darkened cabin, cursing his luck. There was little worry that the raiders would be back tonight. Unless he was as crazy as Elmer Hammer, this move tonight had been Sam's first jab at the valley. He had picked Hammer, knowing that Hammer would scare easy, hoping Hammer would be able to put the fear of God into Margaret Lacey and her crew.

I gave you your chance, Sam, Milo thought to himself. *I covered up for you when we were kids, I strung along in Oro so you could get your big start. I've done what I could because I promised your mother I would. But you're playing the kind of game I know best*

now, Sam; when you start playing with guns you're playing with my tools.

He thought of Lily and he tried to force the picture of her out of his mind. How could a woman as beautiful as Lily get mixed up in a thing like this? He was suddenly very sorry for Lily and he didn't know why he should be. Whatever she got, she had asked for. He walked through the open door of the cabin.

He closed the door first and struck a match, cupping it deep in his hands. There was no sense making any more light than necessary. He saw the lamp on the table and he dropped the match and felt in the darkness until his hand found the chimney. He took the lamp off the table and set it on the floor before lighting it.

The chimney of the lamp was dirty and the wick needed trimming. It sputtered and threw a yellow circle on the floor and then flared into feeble life. Milo waited, letting his eyes become accustomed to the light, and then he looked around the room. One wall was covered with pictures of scantily clad dancing girls. There were two saddles and four or five bridles tossed carelessly into one corner.

Good, he thought. *I'll catch up a horse in the morning and at least won't have to walk back.*

His eyes moved on around the room to the built-in bunk and he felt the hair raise on the back of his neck. Without even knowing he had made the move his gun had streaked from the holster and it was in his hand, cocked. There was a man lying in the bunk.

Something about the shape under the blankets—the way it was huddled—something about the quiet in the room, kept Milo from speaking. He kept his gun ready and moved across the room, poised on the balls of his feet. His left hand dropped down and jerked back the blanket and then the air went out of his lungs and he let his gun drop into the holster.

There was no need for a gun. The man in the bunk was very dead. His shirt had been removed and he was swathed with crude bandages and they were all stiff with blood. The man's eyes were open and he was staring straight up at the ceiling. It was Casey Beal.

Chapter Fifteen

Feeling of Showdown

THE shock of finding the dead man was a numbing thing and at first Milo moved around the cabin as if it hadn't happened. He was hungry and there was a fire in the stove, some coffee in the pot. He found canned beans and tomatoes and opened them, eating them cold, washing them down with the strong, stale coffee. It was when he made a cigarette that he found his hands unsteady.

It was no time for nerves and he made himself examine Casey Beal's body. As near as he could determine the marshal had been shot three times, in the back, and any one of the shots had been enough to kill him. He found a flour sack and doubled it and hung it across the single window in the end of the cabin and, taking the light, he looked at the saddles there in the corner. One of them was dark-stained with blood.

Apparently, then, Casey's horse had

brought him here, just as Elmer Hammer had claimed, but the horse had not come without a rider. It was a miracle that Casey Beal had remained in the saddle and the only answer was that animal fear had made him cling to the horn with a dying grip until the horse had stopped here at his home corral. Milo thought of the marks of a powpow he had seen there at the chokeberry thicket and decided, reconstructing the crime in his mind, that that was where it must have happened.

Wyoming, he decided. Wyoming had been the one who had fired that shot at Milo. Casey had been with him. Later, when Milo had appeared at the church, Casey Beal had cracked and Wyoming had decided to get rid of him. He had taken him to the thicket, along with Travis Mort and Newt Tregor, and there they had reached some sort of agreement—an agreement whereby Casey Beal was to leave the country, probably. And Casey had ridden away, but as he rode Wyoming had changed his mind and put three bullets in his back. Pure conjecture, but it seemed logical.

Milo felt his hand closing around the butt of his gun. He had met men like Wyoming before. They were always dangerous, both to the men they contracted to kill and to the men who hired them.

The feel of death was thick in the cabin and he wanted to get away from it. He had had one full night's sleep in three and the lack of rest and the tension were beginning to tell. He went over to the corner and took a saddle, the older of the two, the one without the blood stains, and he found a bridle, patched but usable. There was a ten-foot length of braided hair rope coiled loosely there under the bits of broken gear and he took that.

He blew out the light then and went outside and the night air was cold and refreshing against his face. He closed the door and walked over toward the smoldering heap which was all that remained of the barn. The acrid smell of burned straw was thick in the air and the smoke from the fire hung in long, thin sheets across the moonlit valley. The barn was a glowing rubble of coals, throwing a pleasant warmth in a wide circle. There was a spring wagon over near the corral and Milo went over to examine it and found a worn tarp wadded up in the back.

He pushed the wagon over into the circle of fire heat and picked up the saddle and tossed it into the back. After that he climbed into the wagon bed, used the saddle for a pillow and covered himself with the sweaty saddle blanket he had taken from the house and with the ragged tarp. The heat from the fireglow reached out and warmed him and, with the ease of old practice, he soon dozed.

It was a fitful sleep, shot with dreams, broken with sudden sounds. He slept in all no more than two hours, but it was enough to take the gravel from his eyes, the strained heaviness from his muscles. The fire had died down to white ash with the sullen stare of red heat beneath. The long streamers of smoke still hung across the valley. He got up and worked his hands and rubbed circulation into his arms and legs and then he went closer to the fire, opening his mackinaw, letting in the heat.

The next thing was to get himself a horse and he took the hair rope and started out across the pasture. The smoke streamers were in layers, head-high, and as he passed through them

the smell of old fire was strong and then he would be into the fresh, sharp after-midnight air. It gave him the peculiar sense of walking from reality into unreality and he thought that all his life he had been doing exactly that.

This thing of hanging onto Sam, wanting Sam's affection, watching Sam skirt closer and closer to shady deals and finally into actual dishonesty. He wondered why he couldn't have stopped Sam a long time back and there was no answer to his own question. He walked out of the smoke and into the fresh air and he thought of Margaret and of how she was trying to carry on the wishes of a man she had never really loved as a daughter should love a father. But there was that family loyalty there, that intangible thing that was stronger than personal likes and dislikes. Perhaps that was the answer to why he had stuck with Sam.

The horses were bunched along the little creek that ran down to the main stream and as he approached them they all raised their heads. One of them snorted, raised his tail, and ran and the rest of them followed. They stopped then, looking back at him, and he kept walking toward them, slowly.

The rope was too short for a throw and he knew he would have to keep after them, patiently, until one or more of them decided to stand and let him approach. He spotted three that were less spooky than the rest and he concentrated on them, finally cutting them from the main bunch. He got behind them and headed them back toward the corral.

It was slow, tiring work. The smell of the fire was too strong and the three horses he followed were afraid of it and twice they broke and ran back to join the main band. He cut them out again, headed them back toward the creek, and this time he worked them up toward the partially finished rail fence, intending to corner them there.

Once he had them against the fence they stood and waited as if they had planned this all along. He approached them without trouble and picked a sturdy-looking black. He approached slowly and put his arm around the animal's neck, passing the rope around and tying it deftly. Once that was done, the horse led without trouble and he took it back and tied it to the wheel of the spring wagon and saddled up. The air was sharp in his nostrils and there was frost in the grass. It was three in the morning, he figured.

He got his rifle from where he had left it by the door of the cabin and he laid it across the skirt of the saddle behind the cantle and tied it with the saddle strings. He cheeked the horse and stepped up and the animal stood there a second, legs spread, quivering, then decided it had a rider up and quieted down.

His choice of mounts had been good. The big black stretched out in an easy lope and Milo held him that way. He deserted the trail in favor of the shorter route up the floor of the valley, figuring he could see the Wagon Tongue camp plainly enough to tell if everything was all right, planning to go straight to the Walker place.

It was pale daylight when he passed the place where the Wagon Tongues were camped on the west side of the valley, a half mile or more from where he was riding. He reined up and scanned the camp carefully. A tarp had been pegged out from the side of the bed wagon, forming a tent. The chuck-wagon tail gate was down and the embers of a fire were vivid, stirred

to life by a morning wind. A half-dozen horses were being held in a rope corral, the rest of the remuda was grazing peacefully a short distance down the valley. There had obviously been no excitement here and he spurred the black and rode on toward the canyon where his own herd was grazing.

He didn't bother to stop there, for the most the raiders could have done to his outfit was to scatter the cattle and that would be of little importance. His concern now was with the Walkers, and he forced the black into that long lope that covered the ground swiftly. The rose touch of the sun was on the snow peaks to his right when he came within sight of the Walker place.

There was thin, new smoke rising straight from the stone chimney. Kindling smoke. Belle would just be stirring out of the warmth of the bed; Tommy would be building up the fire. The old wave of loneliness was strong on him as he rode into the barren yard and he saw a certain beauty even in the barrenness, for there was an expectancy about it, a promise. He reined up and cupped his hand alongside his mouth.

"Any chance of a man getting a cup of coffee?"

The door opened immediately and Tommy Walker stuck his tousled, blond head out. He was wearing no shirt and when he saw the caller he grinned sheepishly.

"Caught me lazy," he said. "Put up your horse and come on in. Belle will be up by then. Usually she sleeps until about noon—"

A tiny shoe slammed against the door jamb just above Tommy's head. He jerked his head back and threw up his arm in mock protection.

"She beats me, too," he said to Milo.

Milo laughed, took the horse over to the barn and unsaddled it, found the sack and gave it a small feed of oats. The black spread its feet and shook the sweat from its hide and then ran to the barn window and nickered to the other horses in the corral.

"That's right," Milo said. "Talk to 'em. Tell 'em I stole you." He put the saddle on the edge of the manger and hung the bridle on a peg and went back outside. The smoke from the chimney was blue and white and it rolled up in tumbling clouds.

He was halfway across the yard when he saw the riders coming up from the south. There were four of them and they were too far away for him to tell who they were for sure. They rode at an easy lope and they were definitely coming this way. He stood there waiting and soon he recognized the slight form of Clete Benson. It was easy then to identify Terry Crawford and—he felt his heart beating harder—Margaret was with them. He wasn't sure about the third man until they were quite close and then he recognized him. It was Elmer Hammer.

The riders pulled up a hundred yards from the house and rode on slowly. Milo hailed them and they gave him no answer but rode on at a carefully held walk. He saw Margaret staring at him and the thing that was in her eyes was the same thing he had seen the night he told her that Bert was dead. It was surprise and hurt and anger, all blended into one. It was bewilderment, that sense of loss that a little girl might feel the first time she discovers her father is not a god. The smile faded slowly from Milo's lips.

Clete Benson and Terry Crawford

split off and Elmer Hammer was between them and they reined up that way, forming a short semi-circle directly in front of Milo. Crawford's coat was open and he kept his right hand at his side, near his gun.

"I reckon we want you, Stuart," Terry Crawford said.

At that moment the black came out of the barn and ran out into the corral. The other horses gathered around the newcomer and there was nipping and squealing and kicking.

"My horse!" Elmer Hammer yelled. "He stole my horse, too!"

"Sure," Milo said. "Right after you stole mine. What the devil is this all about?"

"Start talking, Hammer," Terry Crawford said. "I want to hear you tell it in front of him."

Hammer's eyes shifted first to Crawford and then to Clete Benson. He never did meet Milo's gaze. "Well, like I said, Stuart come ridin' in lookin' for trouble, like he always does—"

"I don't know what you're supposed to be telling, Hammer," Milo said flatly, "but if you're talking about me, I came to your place looking for Casey Beal. I found him after you run out, Hammer."

"You'll have your chance to talk, Stuart," Crawford said.

Hammer ran a finger back and forth under his nose and glanced up at Margaret Lacey. She was sitting there, staring straight ahead, her lips tight, her chin up.

"Well, that's what he said," Hammer said. "But I wasn't gonna tell him Casey Beal was there." His glance swept across to Crawford and he saw Crawford's hand, near his gun, and it gave him a little courage. "Why, I wouldn't 'a' turned a yellow dog over to this so-called lawman. Mind you, I ain't had no truck with Casey Beal or any the rest of them gun-slingin' hawks that Sam Templin and that Lily woman and Stuart here hired—"

"Keep it straight, Hammer," Milo snapped.

"What about Casey Beal?" It was the first time Margaret had spoken. Hammer let his eyes run over Margaret and he rubbed his nose again.

"Like I told you folks," he said, "and I'll tell it right to Stuart's face—Beal come ridin' in about four of the afternoon, I'd say it was. Leastwise you could say he come ridin' in. Actual case of it was his horse brung him. I sold that horse to Beal—"

"What did Beal say? That's what I mean." Margaret's voice was like a whip.

"He just fell off his horse and I seen he was shot in the back and I asked him who done it and he just kept sayin', 'Milo Stuart is after me, Milo Stuart is after me,' over and over, just like that. So I tuk him in the house and patched him up best as I could and then I looked up and sure enough here come Stuart and first off he asked me about Casey Beal—"

"That right, Stuart?" Crawford's eyes were boring straight into Milo's.

Milo shrugged. "Looks to me like you folks have already made up your mind about something," he said. "Sure, I was tracking Beal. I wanted to ask him who it was took a pot shot at me up on the trail that day."

"Or maybe you wanted to find out if the shots you put in his back had done the job well enough?" He hadn't heard Margaret sound that way for five years.

"So naturally I told him no, I hadn't seen Casey," Hammer was saying. He

knew these people would back him up and now he was anxious to talk. "I driv him off with my shotgun," Hammer said, "but I could see him sizin' up my place and I should of knowed right then something was up. It ain't often a wolf travels alone, you know." He was pleased with his analogy and he spat across his lips and looked to Margaret for approval.

"You said he signaled," Crawford said.

"What the devil is this?" Milo said. His temper was getting out of hand and he knew his cheeks were flushed. "Do you people think you're in court or something?"

"It's an idea, Stuart," Clete Benson said. "I got a new rope here."

"And then the shooting started?" Crawford said.

"That's right," Hammer said. "He lit a match and waved it and then all hell —pardon me, Miss Margaret—the devil hisself cut loose. They was out in that grove of pines back of my place—reckon you folks ain't seen my place—and they started cuttin' loose on me."

"And what was I doing all this time?" Milo said disgustedly.

"You was shootin' at me too. You was hid over by my fence and you was shootin'—"

"So why didn't I get you when you crawled out the door?"

"You couldn't see me, that's why!" Hammer said. "I outfoxed yuh!"

Milo shook his head. "I could have plugged you half a dozen times, Hammer. As soon as the barn was burning good I saw you crawling out there. I called to you after they left, didn't I? I hollered my lungs out."

"Yuh sure did," Hammer said, "but I had better sense than to come out and let you back-shoot me the way you did Casey Beal. You almost stepped on me twice and iffen I'd had my shotgun I'd 'a' got yuh sure—"

"I thought you wanted to be friends, Milo." It was Margaret and now she was looking straight at him and her eyes were hard and cold.

"I wanted to, Margaret," he said softly. "But friendship to me means not believing the first pack of lies I hear."

"I reckon you better come along with us, Stuart," Clete Benson said. His hand had started down toward his gun.

"Forget the gun, friend."

The voice came from the window of the cabin and when they turned that way they saw Tommy Walker's broad, scrubbed face and they could see his blue eyes, sighting steadily along the barrel of a rifle. Immediately Milo's hand dropped and came up with his gun. He saw near-hatred in Margaret's eyes when she saw that gun but now he didn't care.

"Hold it a minute, neighbor," Clete Benson said. "Maybe you didn't hear what Mr. Hammer was sayin'—"

"I heard it, all right," Walker said. "Maybe I believe it and maybe I don't. The fact is, you're on my place and Stuart here is a guest of mine. All me and my wife want is to get along with people, including you folks, and this ain't the way to start getting along."

"You're right about that, neighbor," Clete Benson said. "Harborin' a known gun hawk like Stuart don't make for friendly relations, far as I'm concerned."

"How about my horse?" Hammer squealed. "That's one of my best horses—"

"The one you've got of mine was my best, too," Milo said. "Meet me out in the open sometime to trade back."

"Get goin'," Tommy Walker said. "Come back when you've cooled off and we'll talk it out."

"You heard the man," Milo said.

For a long second his glance was locked with Margaret's and then Margaret's left hand was tight against the reins. She spoke across her shoulder to Clete Benson.

"Maybe we should have kept up with those shooting lessons you were giving me, Clete," she said.

"I'll handle him, Margaret," Terry Crawford said. "I'll watch my back and sometime I'll get him in the open and then I'll handle it. I'll do that for your brother and for your dad." He jerked his horse savagely and Clete and Hammer turned in behind him.

They were gone a good five minutes and Milo stood there in the yard, looking after them. He heard the door of the cabin open and Tommy and Belle came out. Belle's face was white with the strain and Tommy had the rifle in his hand.

"Thanks, Tommy," Milo Stuart said. "Thanks a lot."

"It was because of Belle," Tommy Walker said. "I didn't want no gunplay in front of Belle."

"It was all a lie, Walker," Milo said. "I was trying to give Hammer a hand last night. I found Casey Beal dead in his cabin."

Walker was looking at him steadily, his blue eyes hard. "I don't want none of your fight, Milo," he said levelly, "and I don't want no fight with my neighbors. I don't know what your argument was with Casey Beal and I don't care."

"You think I shot him in the back?"

He saw Walker's arm go around Belle's shoulder and Walker met his gaze, steadily, unflinching. "I reckon if you was to want to shoot a man, you wouldn't shoot him in the back and then foller him along to see him die. Beyond that I can't say, Milo."

"Thanks for that much, anyway," Milo said. "I'll be going."

He walked slowly toward the barn and the old feeling of showdown was strong on him. He had been tangled up in this sort of thing before and it never ended until you got the man who was doing the gun hiring.

He took a rope and caught up the black and as he saddled up he thought of Belle and Tommy Walker standing there together. The cameo he had bought her was there against the hollow of her throat and the black velvet ribbon was soft against the whiteness of her skin.

Chapter Sixteen

The Dying Town

THE town of Oro was dying and it wasn't a quiet passing. In two short days the town had changed from a roaring camp with an undercurrent of worry into a panic-stricken mass of humanity stumbling over themselves to get away while there was still a spark of life in the place.

The freighters and teamsters held their prices high and got what they asked. The crazy, driving lust that had brought men here seemed to work in reverse and those who had been the town's biggest boosters were the first to leave.

Lily Devore watched it with the terrifying detached feeling that all this had happened before—that she was reliving a bad dream. She didn't re-

member the actual war; she had been too young. But she did remember the aftermath and the talk of her people and it was as if she herself had lived in those luxurious days. And yet her first memory was not of luxury at all but of poverty, and it was the worst sort of poverty because it was the poverty of defeat. She remembered a father who had never had to work in his life, a gentleman with soft manners and softer hands, and that father was out in the fields and working on the docks and always they were moving, leaving this place, finding that one, moving on again. She saw the movement of humanity in the street and it was like an old pattern and here she was again, the center of defeat.

The dull shock of realizing that this was the end and that their only out was for her and Sam to take over the valley and its cattle; the stunning realization that she had made herself a part of a plan that was destined to kill the only man she had ever loved; the crushing pressure of noise and questions and questions and questions—"Lily, what'll we do, Lily? Shall we stay around?" "You want us to stay with you, Lily?" She put everything else aside and took care of the girls who had taken care of her.

She went to the general store and raised five hundred dollars of the five thousand due her. There was a restaurant she had financed and it was doing well, even today. Men had to eat. She got a little there and it was enough to square up the hotel bill and to pay money due the Spencers, where she lived. Mrs. Spencer had done a lot of sewing for Lily and the girls. She joked and laughed and told them all, "When you change your mind and come back in the spring you'll find beer at the Golden Lily has gone up to a dollar a glass." She paid the girls and when some of them tried to refuse she fired them on the spot and paid them anyway.

Some of the smaller merchants closed their doors as if they were going home for dinner. They never came back. The larger stores held on, but by the middle of the second day prices had dropped to nothing and there were no takers. Lily watched the prices tumble and she thought, *if I only had money*— She had sworn that never again in her life would she be caught short of money and yet here she was without a penny in her purse. The wagons that hauled the girls and their possessions down the hill had taken the last of it.

She walked through the Golden Lily, the place that had been her pride and joy and her income, and she saw two men at the bar drinking steadily. She went over and stood by them and called them by name.

"You wouldn't buy a lady a drink, would you?" she said.

The men looked at her and grinned wryly. One had been the owner of the bank, the other had run the hotel. Of all the men in Oro, these two were the most substantial. Too substantial, even, to borrow money from Lily.

The banker said, "You too, Lily?"

She shrugged. "I have enough to pay for the drink, if that's what you mean."

The hotel man laughed. "No, Lily, the drink's on me. When I think of the money you've spent in my place—"

"Where did it go?" Lily said. She beat her fist on the bar. "There was no end to money and now there isn't a cent in the town. Where did it go?"

The banker licked the end of his finger and wrote his name on the bar.

"Five thousand dollars a foot for claims, a twenty-five-thousand-dollar loan to the Bucket outfit for new equipment, an investment here, another there, five hundred small loans of a hundred to a thousand apiece—" He dusted his hands together. "You know, Lily," he said, "a banker is a wicked old man. He takes everybody's money and keeps it. What people don't realize is that sometimes the wicked old man passes out money to people and the people keep it."

"But the hotel," Lily said. "You didn't loan money, surely."

"Ever hear of a mortgage, Lily?" the hotel man said. "I borrowed every nickle I could get my hands on to come up here and build this place. You know what the lumber in that building cost me?" He grinned. "Well, it was too much. Here's to Oro!" He raised his shot glass and downed it.

"Any champagne back there?" Lily said to the bartender.

"Sure, Lily, there's champagne."

"Well set out three bottles and pop the corks loud," Lily said. "That's on the house. After that, double the price on everything and no more credit. If I'm going broke I'm going broke in a high-class way. Cheer up, boys. We can use the hotel for firewood and cook on top of the bank safe."

The bartender slid out glasses and popped the first bottle of wine.

"To Lily," the men said, doffing their glasses.

"To me," said Lily Devore.

She seldom drank anything and after her fourth glass of champagne her nose was tingling and she felt very wise, but the world looked no better. If anything, it looked worse. She decided she had had enough of this and she excused herself and started walking around the room, looking at the ornate scrollwork of which she had been so proud, getting a lump in her throat when she saw the piano and the stage. These fixtures could be sold someplace. That would be something.

She walked over to the roulette wheel that she used to run herself and she picked up a blue chip and put it on the double "O". She spun the wheel, listening to the familiar click of the ball in the race and she watched it bounce to a stop on a red sixteen.

"This time I was only kidding," she said.

She had been completely lost in watching the wheel. She wasn't aware of the fact that the banker and the hotel man had left; she didn't see Wyoming come in. She looked up when the wheel had stopped turning and he was standing there near her, grinning down at her.

"You like to gamble?" he said.

She hadn't seen Wyoming since his talk with Sam and later when she had asked Sam about it he had shook his head and told her to forget it. "I lost my head," he had said. "I saw everything cracking up and I just lost my head. Of course I didn't go through with it. Forget it." She had come as close to loving Sam in that moment as she ever would.

"I guess I like to gamble," she said. "I always lose."

"Only a sucker quits," Wyoming said.

"A sucker or a person that can't afford to lose."

"Maybe you ought to make a good bet," Wyoming said. "One where if you lose you win."

"For example?"

He smiled at her and she felt as if he had reached out and torn her dress.

"For example this." He reached into his inside coat pocket and took out a buckskin pouch. There was a familiar, heavy thud to it when it hit the roulette table. The heavy sound of gold coins.

"Where'd you get that?" she said quietly.

"A business deal," he said. "I'll put it on the red six. Go ahead and spin the wheel."

"If the wheel wins?"

"It's yours," he said. "All of it."

"And if I lose?"

He laughed and she knew the answer. "You flatter me," she said. She moved around the table. "Now get your filthy self out of town before I call Sam out here and have him fill you so full of lead you can't walk."

Wyoming threw back his head and laughed. "You got things twisted, ain't you, girlie? I'm the one Sam turns to if there's any lead-throwin' to be done."

"Get out!" she said. "We don't want anything more to do with you, Sam or I either one."

He reached out suddenly and gripped her arm and the smile was gone from his face. "What you tryin' to do, girlie?" he said. "Deal yourself in where you don't belong?"

"The deal's off," she said hotly, trying to twist away from him. "You know it is! Sam told you that."

He released his grip and shoved her back against the table. "So that's the way it goes, is it? I told you I didn't like workin' for no woman."

He snatched up the buckskin pouch and opened it and ran his fingers down inside and pulled out the diamond necklace Sam had given her. He held it there, dangling it in front of her eyes.

"You better quit listening to Sam," he said. "Sam's lyin' to yuh. Anyway, Sam can't do you no good now. I'm the one's got the pretty present."

She slapped him so hard he took a step back and in that instant she grabbed one of the heavy Douglas chairs and crashed it against his shins. She tried to get by him then and he reached out and grabbed her and twisted her arm wickedly behind her back. She bit her lip to keep from crying out and her hair came loose and was hanging down one side of her face. Still holding her arm, he forced her around to where she was facing him and then, holding her with one hand, he bent down and kissed her on the lips, holding her, hurting her arm.

The bartender had watched it and his face was white and streaked with sweat. He reached under the bar and got his sawed-off shotgun and laid it across the bar.

"That's enough, Wyoming," he said.

Wyoming turned, still holding Lily with his left hand. He saw the gun on the bar and he saw the sweat on the bartender's face and he grinned. "Go ahead and shoot," he said.

The bartender could not shoot without hitting Lily. He stood there staring and his tongue ran across his lips twice and then slowly his hands moved away from the gun. "Please, Wyoming," he said.

"Sure," Wyoming said. His right hand dropped down and moved up and there was a roar and a flash of flame and then gunsmoke was thick in the room and the bartender leaned his head on the bar and after a little while he folded and his head disappeared.

She tried to scream and no sound would come from her throat and Wyoming was looking at her, grinning, and she could see an animal wildness

in his eyes and then he was looking past her, toward the back of the room.

"Just comin' in to see you, Sam," Wyoming said. "I reckon it's time we talk over a few things." He still had the gun in his hand and he kept it pointed at Sam.

A dead silence had hit the street and now it was gone and men were shouting back and forth and a woman was screaming. A thin, high-pitched voice yelled from the safety of a door across the street: "Anything wrong in there?"

She saw Travis Mort and Newt Tregor standing in the doorway of the Golden Lily and they both had guns in their hands. "There's nothing wrong," Travis Mort called to the street. "Just a miner celebratin' the death of Oro. We'll handle things. You better keep back."

"The marshal's in there," another man called. "He'll handle it."

"Go on back in the office, Sam," Wyoming said. "We'll have a nice talk."

The one-day growth of beard was black on Sam's heavy face. His eyes were bloodshot and his hair was mussed. He backed into the office and sat heavily in his chair, and he kept his hands on top of the desk. Wyoming released his grip on Lily and shoved her into a chair and with the heel of his boot he closed the door.

"I want things out in the open, Sam," Wyoming said.

Sam Templin worked his mouth and no words came out.

"You tell me one thing and you tell this girlie something else," Wyoming said. "I don't like that. It makes a man feel like he don't know where he stands. Tell me, Sam, have we got a deal or ain't we got a deal?"

Sam Templin nodded his head. "It's a deal," he said.

"You see, girlie?" Wyoming said. "Your man's been lyin' to yuh. You better string along with me, girlie. I wouldn't lie to you like that."

"Sam!" Lily said. "You're crazy! You don't know what you're doing!"

"I'm broke," Sam Templin said. "Everything I had—" He stood up suddenly and pounded the desk with his fist and the veins stood out like cords on his forehead. "I'm broke, you hear that? Everything I worked for is gone! Everything!"

"Sam, we've still got the Golden Lily. We can haul it out and sell the fixtures—"

"We took care of Hammer last night," Wyoming said. "That barn of his made a right pretty fire. Newt is good at buildin' fires." He grinned at Lily. "We didn't get that boy friend of yours yet, girlie. We'll have to take care of that. I hate to think of you pinin' your heart out over that feller."

"Sam, listen to me!" She had run across the room and now she had Sam's hands in both of hers and she was clinging to him, looking up into his face. "Sam, we have to stop this! Tommy Walker and Belle have a place out there. Do you hear that, Sam?"

He looked at her and he sat down suddenly and held his face in his hands. Great sobs shook his shoulders.

"Everything," he said. "Everything."

"It doesn't matter, Sam," she said. She was stroking his hair. "We'll keep the fixtures. What we've done once we can do again, you hear? You and I, Sam. I'll go with you and I'll stay with you and we'll start over—"

"You're breakin' my heart," Wyoming said.

"Sam, I love you. Isn't that what you want to hear? I'll go with you anyplace, Sam—"

He lifted his head and looked at her and gradually the composure returned to him. "You mean that, Lily?"

She tried to meet his eyes and she couldn't. She gripped her hands at her sides and forced herself to look at him.

"I'll go with you," she said. "Anyplace you say."

"For what price, Lily?" he asked.

"Forget the valley. Tell Wyoming the deal's off."

"You love Milo that much?"

"It's not Milo," she said and now she couldn't stop the tears. "It's Belle and Tommy. It's everything. It's no good for us, Sam. You and I can do other things. We can start over, just the two of us." She put her arms around him and he held her fiercely, kissing her again and again.

His words were muffled against her hair. "I love you, Lily. Remember that."

He let her go and now he stood up and the size of him was there again and the set of his jaw was strong. Lily saw him and she remembered that Milo had said once he wanted Sam to be the man he started out to be. Perhaps Sam was being that now.

"I want you to pull out, Wyoming," he said.

Wyoming stood there, his feet apart, that same grin on his lips. "Sure, Sam," he said. "If that's what you want. I'm open to any kind of a deal."

"How much, Wyoming?"

"How much you got, Sam?"

"The Golden Lily," Sam said. "That's all. When things quiet down you can get wagons in here and haul it out. It cost Lily and me fifty thousand to set this place up. You can take it all and go into business or you can sell it off piece by piece and get half that out of it."

"It ain't a bad deal, Sam," Wyoming said.

"You'll take it?"

"No."

A small panic played around the corners of Sam's mouth. "What else?"

"The girl," Wyoming said. "She goes with the fixtures."

All the color drained from Sam Templin's face. For a swift second he seemed to grow in stature and she saw the muscles bulge under his coat and then his right hand darted up and over and she remembered the gun he carried. She heard the crash of the shot and she saw Sam stagger back and Wyoming was standing there, that grin on his lips, and the smoking gun in his hand.

"Sam was a damn fool, girlie," Wyoming said. "You'll do better with me."

The clamor rose in the street again and now a baby was crying and there were hoarse shouts. The door burst open and Newt Tregor was there.

"Boss, are you crazy? We can't hold 'em off much longer. That crowd's gettin' nasty—"

"I'll talk to 'em," Wyoming said. "I got this tin star on my shirt, remember? They'll listen to me. A lot of people are gonna listen to me from now on." He dropped his still smoking gun into its holster and he smiled at Lily. "Go ahead and run, girlie," he said. "Get it out of your system. Because wherever you run, I'll find you, and when I find you I want you to be ready to be sweet and pleasant."

He closed the door and went out into the saloon and Lily could hear the shout of the crowd. She dropped to her knees beside Sam and she knew he was dead and she stood up slowly. There was a back door to the place. She tried it and found it unlocked and she step-

ped out into the alley. At first she ran, and then she realized how hopeless that was, and she turned around and retraced her steps. Wyoming was right. There was no place to go. She started to cry and she stumbled along blindly.

She could hear Wyoming, shouting to the crowd. "Just a drunken fight," he was saying. "As long as I'm marshal of this town there's gonna be law and order—"

The voice reached out and touched her and it was like the clammy foulness of his kiss. She started to run again, and she was on the road that led to the Walker place. She kept running and the breath was pounding in her lungs and it was choking her and she was stumbling but she kept running and finally she was calling, *Milo! Milo!* but there was no sound coming from the dryness of her throat. *Milo! Milo!*

The world was a dark, swimming mass and she was running through it and dark fingers were reaching out, pulling her back, trying to hold her—*Milo!*

Chapter Seventeen

Death in the Golden Lily

THE temper in Milo Stuart grew into a cold determination as he rode away from the Walker place. It was senseless to fool himself any longer, to think that Sam and Lily might turn back before it was too late. It was already too late and now there was only one answer and it was the answer he had always dreaded, not through any sense of fear but because he had hoped that for once in his life something could be settled without a gun.

He wanted no trouble with the Wagon Tongue outfit; he had no intention of having any. But from here on he would quit dividing his attentions. From here on this was a personal fight with Sam and Wyoming and Travis Mort and Newt Tregor and if he had to go it alone, that was all right too.

His resentment toward Elmer Hammer was of a different nature. Whether the man was deliberately lying or was merely confused, he didn't know, but it was probably the latter.

He circled around after leaving the Walker place, making no attempt to conceal his movements. He realized that Margaret, Clete Benson, and Terry Crawford had not headed straight back to their camp but had taken the trail that led up and connected with the one which ran from town to their camp. He had no idea why they had taken this longer way back to their camp; he didn't have the time nor the inclination to worry about it. He kept cutting back, and in time he reached the wagon road that ran from Oro to the Walker place.

Still he rode openly. He had checked his guns, both the six-shooter and the rifle, and they were loaded and ready, and now that old vacantness was in his stomach but his eyes were set straight ahead and his hands were steady. He rode at a slow canter, holding the black in with his left hand, his ungloved right hand swinging easily just above the butt of his gun, his elbow slightly bent.

He was less than a mile from Oro when he saw Lily Devore running down the road. At first he didn't recognize her. Her dress was torn where

her shoe had repeatedly caught the hem. Her hair had come undone completely and it was in wild disarray around her face. She was running and yet she was making small headway. She leaned far forward, her body jerking crazily, her feet lifting and striking out, but it was all done in a slow, labored manner and she was staggering first to one side of the road, then to the other.

He threw himself from the saddle and ran to her and when he reached out to keep her from falling she struck at him and her nails raked his face and she beat against his chest with her fists and he could barely feel the blows. Her eyes were swollen nearly shut and the tear streaks were smudges of mud on her cheeks. Her gown had slipped off one shoulder and the shoulder was black with an ugly bruise. He gripped her and held her and she tried to bite him and he saw the terror in her eyes.

He slapped her hard with the back of his hand and then slapped her again with the palm. She broke away from him and threw up her arms to protect her face and he took her shoulders and shook her hard. He felt her go limp and then she was staring at him with those wild, dark eyes and suddenly there was recognition there and she slumped toward him and twisted her fingers in the fabric of his coat and clung to him and she was crying hysterically.

"Milo!" It was the only word he could understand.

"Lily!" He shouted the word. "Listen to me, Lily!" She was moaning softly, unable to speak and he shook her and slapped her again. "What is it, Lily? Tell me!"

"Sam," she said brokenly. "Sam's dead."

He felt the fire run out of him and he was alone there in the road and all the past flashed through his mind with a startling clarity. Sam, the flesh-and-blood son of the Templins, never letting Milo forget his place. Sam, the successful one, the handsome one. Sam with the ability to make money, the speculations that lost money. Sam, the one who took chances and finally made money his god; and Sam, surrounded by forces that could wreck him.

"Who, Lily?" His voice sounded as if it came from a great distance.

"Wyoming. I have to warn Belle and Tommy. I have to warn Margaret Lacey. Sam tried to stop it. He tried to stop it because I asked him to and when Wyoming wouldn't quit he tried to draw a gun and Wyoming killed him—" She jerked away from Milo and started that crazy, broken run again. "I've got to warn them. I've got to find Milo—"

He overtook her easily and picked her up and she was like a child in his arms. Her hair was across his face and the scent of it was in his nostrils and he could feel the warmth of her body against his own. He packed her over to the horse and he lifted her up into the saddle and placed her there, putting her hands on the pommel, closing her fingers. The horse shied violently and she nearly fell and he had to catch her and hold her and all the time he was speaking to the horse. Her torn dress fell in folds and partially covered the black-net stockings and her hair fell around her shoulders.

He cheeked the horse and swung up behind the saddle and his right arm went around her, holding her close. The horse shied again and turned in two tight circles, then feeling the pressure of Milo's legs, the control on the

reins, he settled down fretfully. They rode to Oro that way and when he saw Lily arranging her dress to cover herself he knew she would be all right.

The confusion in the town startled him. People were milling around the street, walking in a daze, and the conversation boiled up around him and he heard pieces of it.

"I'm gettin' out today," a bearded miner said. "I ain't made wages on my claim for a month."

"Why not leave?" another said. "What's there to wait for? With the Bucket and the Bluebonnet closed a man would starve here in a week's time. I got a wife and six kids to think about. Hell yes, I'm leavin', even if the whole family has to walk—"

It made sense then, Sam's last desperate effort. He had seen the terrifying swift collapse of his town and in that first grip of panic he had struck out with the first weapon at hand. *I shouldn't have left him*, he thought. *I might have been able to stop him.*

Lily Devore turned in the saddle and looked at him. She was composed now and the wild fear was gone from her eyes.

"Sam died trying to protect me," she said softly. "Remember that, Milo."

He didn't answer. He rode up in front of the general store and got down and he reached his arms up for her. For a moment he held her and his face was close to hers and then he put her down.

"You keep under cover," he said.

She put her hands on his cheeks and kissed him swiftly. "I won't tell you not to fight, Milo," she said. "I know you have to. When a woman loves a man enough she knows how he feels."

He stood there looking into her eyes and he felt a warm vacantness sweeping through him. This woman was in love with him! He knew, just as suddenly, that this had always been so, ever since she had first met him. She had accepted him when he was running, accepted him at his weakest moment. She had never blamed him nor criticized him in any way and when he had turned against her she had continued to love him— He thought of Margaret Lacey and of the thing they had called love and he knew that Margaret had been right when she had said they had mistaken loneliness for love.

"Keep under cover," he said gruffly, and he started walking down the street toward the Golden Lily.

He had taken no more than a dozen steps when he saw the pack horses there at the rail. They wore the Wagon Tongue brand on their left hip and as he turned his head he saw Margaret Lacey and Elmer Hammer standing there on the porch of the store. He knew now why Margaret and her men had not headed back toward their camp. They had come to town for desperately needed supplies. He saw Margaret staring at him and he turned his back and walked on down toward the Golden Lily and now every nerve was alert and the muscles across his shoulders were tense and as he walked they relaxed and his right hand swung close to the butt of his gun.

He saw Newt Tregor step out onto the porch of the Golden Lily. He saw the surprise in Tregor's eyes and he saw the quick recovery, the twisting of Tregor's thick lips, the slight bending of his knees. Then a voice behind him said, "All right, Stuart. Turn around and get it!" He recognized the voice of Terry Crawford.

He half turned and he saw Terry standing there, his hand spread over the butt of his gun. He saw Margaret on the sidewalk, her face white, and he saw Lily and he heard Lily scream. These things he saw in the space of a heartbeat and he knew that Tregor had started for his gun.

He was caught in a crossfire, just as he had been that night he killed Bert Lacey, and again he had to make a choice. On one side of him was a man he wanted to kill and on the other was a misguided fool, a hotheaded kid who thought he knew what he was doing. He had seen Tregor draw a gun before; he knew the man was dismally slow. He knew he could draw and probably drop Terry Crawford and still have a chance at Tregor. In that swift second when he saw Terry's eyes he was seeing Bert Lacey's eyes and they were eyes that had haunted him for five years.

All right, Margaret, he thought. *I took something from you that night. Now I'll pay it back.* He whirled and drew his gun and his back was fully exposed to Terry Crawford.

He heard Lily scream, "Stop it, you fool!" He heard the crash of Terry Crawford's gun but there was no impact of lead and now there was no time to turn or think. Newt Tregor's gun was out and up and Milo Stuart was firing and the old kick of the butt against the palm of his hand was a familiar thing. He saw Tregor's gun fire, saw the geyser of mud six feet in front of him. He fired again and Tregor slammed back against the wall. He dropped his gun and he was clawing at his chest.

Terry Crawford's thin voice was saying, "My God! Oh, my God!"

Milo glanced back and Lily Devore was lying there in the street and Terry Crawford was bending over her and Margaret was running out toward them.

"She threw herself in front of my gun," Terry Crawford said. A gun crashed and a bullet creased Milo's shoulder.

The voice of the town rose in a wild scream and people were running, falling over each other, and a gun blasted from the Golden Lily. Clete Benson walked out into the street. He had a rifle in his hand. He started firing it, holding it at hip level, working the lever, firing it into the now shattered window of the Golden Lily. It broke the fire for a second.

"Clete!" Milo called. "You and Crawford get those women out of the street!"

He ducked low and ran, his gun in his hand, and when he had pressed himself against a wall on the same side of the street as the Golden Lily he could pause for a second and look back. Crawford and Benson had picked up Lily Devore and they were running toward the store. He saw Lily's hair, black, hanging, and he saw the white face and he felt a knife twisting in his chest. The cold rage that was in him was a killer rage and he moved swiftly down the sidewalk until he was at the entrance of the Golden Lily.

A man was crying inside the saloon. He kept saying, "Help me, Wyoming.

Help me!"

Milo recognized the voice of Travis Mort. Apparently one of Clete Benson's bullets had found a target. He moved closer to the door, standing there with his back against the wall, half turned, the gun raised shoulder-high.

"You in there, Wyoming?" he called.

"Sure," Wyoming called back. "Come in and have a drink."

"I might do that," Milo said. "You're a poor shot."

"My horse was jumpy that day," Wyoming said.

"Were you on the ground when you shot Casey Beal in the back?"

"Yeah, that's right," Wyoming said. "On the ground. Like now."

Milo reached out with his foot and kicked the swinging door. There was a triple blast from inside the saloon and the door splintered.

"You wasted those, Wyoming," Milo said. "How many bullets you got left?"

"Come in and we'll count 'em," Wyoming said.

Milo kicked the door again but there was no answering fire. Travis Mort was still crying. It was a low, moaning sound.

This was a battle of nerves, two men waiting it out, knowing that one of them must die, waiting for that little break that would spell the difference.

Milo heard Wyoming moving, heard his boots squeak as his feet tested the boards. That might be the break. A man moving might be a bit off balance.

Milo threw himself against the swinging door, rolling his body, turning the gun, and he saw Wyoming back near the door to Sam's office. Milo's gun blasted and he knew he had missed and then he was throwing himself full length toward the end of the bar. A bullet snarled high above his head, another kicked a long splinter from the floor, but he was behind the bar now and he saw the dead bartender.

Wyoming's gun blasted again and glass shattered and a thin trickle of whisky ran down and spilled on the dead bartender's face. He crawled over the body and down the full length of the bar, his head always up, the gun always ready. When he was near the end of the bar he reached into the long bin that was there and got an empty bottle with his left hand. He threw it and it hit the wall not six feet from where Wyoming was standing. At the same time Milo stood up.

The ruse had served a purpose but it had not distracted Wyoming completely. He swung his left-hand gun and fired and the bullet plowed a howling furrow in the polished bar top and now Milo was firing back. He felt a slug slam into him and he couldn't tell where it had hit him but he knew he was still on his feet and there against the wall was the man who had tried to dry-gulch him, the man who had killed Sam Templin.

This is for Sam, he kept thinking, and he fired again. He knew his teeth were tightly clenched, he knew that blood was soaking his shirt. He saw Wyoming standing there, a gun in either hand, and Wyoming had that smile on his lips, but he wasn't firing back.

The gun in Milo's hand roared again and it wasn't until then that he realized the last shot hadn't been necessary. Even while he fired Wyoming had been slipping down the wall. For a second he was there against the wall in a sitting position and then he leaned to one side and he was still holding those two guns.

Milo ran across the room, his head turned toward where Travis Mort lay, his gun still ready. He saw Mort moving in his own blood, trying to crawl. He knew Mort would give him no trouble. He kicked open the door of Sam's office and went inside.

Sam was there on the floor, his gun half drawn. For a long time Milo looked down at him and then he said, softly, "So long, Big Brother."

He holstered his gun and walked out through the back door into the brilliant winter sunshine. A moment later the full impact of the long tension hit him and he stood leaning against a building and he was deathly sick.

Clete Benson found him there. The old man stood there, the rifle in his hands, and he looked at Milo Stuart, remembering the past in an old man's way. He had seen that play out there on the street; he had known for sure that Milo had been thinking back and had made a decision. He had neither hated Bert Lacey nor liked him a lot, but he knew now that the story Milo Stuart had told was true. He had never intended to kill Bert.

"You're hurt, Stuart," Clete Benson said.

Milo looked up and now he realized blood was dripping from the fingers of his left hand. He said, "Lily?"

"She's alive," Clete said. "She keeps askin' for you." He moved closer. "We better take a look at that arm."

"It can wait," Milo said. "Where is she?"

"They took her across to the hotel." He put his hand on Milo's right arm. "Stuart—?"

"Yes?"

"The boy," Clete Benson said. "Terry Crawford— He lost his head, Stuart. You ought to be able to see that. He's in love with the girl and all he ever heard about you was what the old man said—" He stopped awkwardly, not knowing whether he had said the right thing.

"I'll talk to you later," Milo said. He started out between the buildings but Clete Benson blocked his way.

"You got a right to kill him, I reckon," Clete said. "Margaret knows that too, now."

Milo shoved by him and walked down between the buildings. He came out on the street and it was deserted. He crossed to the hotel and when he entered the lobby he fought himself to keep from running up the stairs. He saw Margaret standing outside a door and she motioned to him.

Lily was lying in bed, her face white, her eyes closed, the dark hair spilled softly around her face. He dropped down on his knees beside the bed and took one of her hands in his right hand.

"You fool," he said softly, "you crazy, wonderful fool!"

He lifted her hand and pressed his lips against the palm of it. Lily opened one eye and closed it swiftly.

They were alone in the room and now Milo's left arm was beginning to bother him and he was getting dizzy from the loss of blood. He reached out and touched her face with his fingertips, tracing the curve of her cheek, touching her lips.

"Don't die, Lily," he whispered against her ear. "I want you to live. I want that more than anything else in the world."

Her lips moved and tears squeezed from between her tightly closed lids. "Darling," she said. "Please say that again."

He looked at her closely and now

there was color in her cheeks and her lips were pouting. He stood up and jerked back the blanket and he saw the small compress bandage against the white flesh of her shoulder.

"Damn it!" he exploded. "You're not hurt!"

She sat up and her eyes were angry. "Well, are you sorry?"

"You made me think you were hurt!"

"I did no such thing! You decided that for yourself!" Her eyes went wide and her mouth was a round, open O. "Milo! *You're* hurt!" She started to get out of bed, remembered she wasn't dressed, and pulled the covers tight around her throat.

"Help!" she screamed. "Do something!"

"Ah, go sleep it off!" Milo said disgustedly.

He turned around and stalked out of the room and when he was out in the hall he felt the sudden dizziness hit him. He stood there a second, trying to fight it off, and then the floor went out from under him and the ceiling came down and hit him on the head. He fell full length and he heard a dozen voices all shouting and yelling and he couldn't do a thing but lie there and let the darkness come in and claim him.

Chapter Eighteen

"Two Boys and Two Girls."

HE AWOKE in a clean bed in a hotel room and the sun was bright in his window. He felt fine with the exception of a soreness in his left arm. He tried to move it and winced with the pain. He glanced around the room, saw no one, and he started to get up. A man's voice stopped him.

"Why don't you just take it easy, Milo?"

He looked across the room and Terry Crawford was sitting there in a chair. His face was drawn and haggard and there were dark smudges under his eyes and Milo knew he had been sitting there all night.

"What the hell you doing here?" Milo said.

"I figured you'd want to talk to me."

"About what?"

"Don't make it any tougher than it is," Crawford said.

"What do you want me to do, cry?"

"I was wrong about you, Milo," Crawford said. "I made a fool out of myself. I was in love with Margaret and I knew you had hurt her and all I could see was gunning you down and I thought maybe that would cure the hurt—"

"Get me my pants, will you?" Milo said.

Crawford brought the pants from the back of a chair and when he tried to help Milo out of bed Milo shoved him away.

"If there's anything I can do to make it up to you—" Crawford said.

"You can help me build my cabin."

"You're staying here, then?"

"Any objections?"

Crawford's face was even more haggard. "I guess that means you want Margaret."

"Does it?" Milo said.

"I can't blame you," Crawford said. "I've lost any right I ever had to ask her to marry me."

"What have you been drinking?"

"Nothing— What do you mean?"

"Give me my hat," Milo said.

He took the hat and slammed it on

his head and walked out of the room and then he remembered he had forgotten his shirt. He came back and tried to put it on and this time he had to accept Crawford's help. He stood there looking at Crawford and he could feel the misery in the man.

"How old are you, Crawford?"

"Twenty-three," Crawford said.

"Take an old man's advice," Milo said. "Go find Margaret Lacey and grab her and kiss her and keep right on kissing her until she quits fighting. By that time you'll feel strong as a bull. Then you just stand back and if anybody comes near her you punch 'em right in the nose!"

"Is that the way you'd do it, Milo?" Lily was there in the doorway. She had a silk wrapper drawn around her. Her hair had been done up and she looked as fresh as a spring morning. Her lips were full and red, her eyes luminous. Milo looked at her and he felt that sinking in the pit of his stomach.

"Hah!" Milo said.

He pushed by her and went downstairs and he saw Margaret Lacey in the lobby. He stood there and glared at her and then he said, "You better go up there and give that Crawford a pill. I think he's got a fever."

He saw the quick concern in Margaret's eyes. "He's what?" She ran by him and started up the stairs.

Be careful when you go in through that door, lady, he said to himself. *That boy's confused, but he strikes me as one who can take good advice.* He reached up with his right hand and pulled his hat down tight.

As he stepped through the door he heard Margaret's voice, startled, almost angry. "Terry!" There was a long silence and then Margaret's voice again, a little softer now, still startled, but pleasantly so. "Terry?" Another long silence and then Margaret again, a soft, happy sigh. "Oh, Terry—"

The little pain was there in Milo's chest, an old pain, the pain of one of the thousand scars that goes to make up a man's heart. It was gone then and there was a grin on his face when he stepped out into the street.

The town was nearly deserted. There were fifty people remaining, perhaps, and these few would always remain and when Oro was a ghost town these few would be the ghosts, rattling around in the skeletons of the past. He saw the Golden Lily and the big store and he thought of Sam.

He ran into Tommy Walker on the street. There was mud on Tommy's shoes and his hands were stained with it.

"We buried the others," Walker said. "We didn't know about Sam. We figured we'd wait for you—"

There was a hard lump in Milo's throat. "Thanks," he said bluntly. "I think Sam would like it out there at my place."

He found the black that belonged to Elmer Hammer up at the livery stable. He tried to saddle up and he was having a devil of a time when he looked up and Belle and Tommy Walker were there watching him.

"Well?" he said.

"Where are you going, Milo?" Belle said.

"Home," Milo said.

"You can't sleep out on the ground with that arm in this kind of weather."

"I'll have a house soon," Milo said.

"Meanwhile you'd better stay at our place," Belle said.

He looked at her and saw the cameo at her throat. "We'll see," he said.

Tommy had moved over and was finishing the job of saddling the black.

"Milo?" Belle's voice was soft.

"Yes?"

"Don't hurt Lily."

"Hurt her?" Milo said. "You couldn't hurt her with a club."

"Probably not," Belle said. "But you could kill her with a word."

He saw Belle smiling at him and he knew it was the kind of a smile a happily married woman wears when she sees an eligible bachelor walking down the aisle. It made him mad. He pulled himself into the saddle and kicked the big black hard. When he looked back Tommy and Belle were standing there with their arms around each other and they were still smiling that way.

He wanted to be alone for a little while, that was all. He wanted to think and he wanted to feel the breeze on his face and he wanted to do one more thing. He rode south, through the valley, past his own place and down to where the stream came in where the Wagon Tongue wagons were camped. Off to his left he saw a rider and he recognized his own horse. He spurred the black and rode that way.

Elmer Hammer saw him coming and he tried to get away, then gave it up and sat there, waiting. When Milo was within hailing distance Hammer yelped, "Stuart! Don't shoot! I ain't armed! I was all wrong about that night, Stuart! I told everybody I was wrong! I ain't got nothin' against yuh! I was so blamed scared and mixed up—"

"Good-looking horse you got, Hammer," Milo said. He was grinning. "I'll trade you even."

Hammer's mouth dropped open and then he was scrambling out of the saddle. "Gosh, yes. I meant to leave this horse of yours in town but I didn't want to take the black without askin' yuh and I didn't have no other way—"

"This black's a fine horse," Milo said. "When I get settled down I'd like to buy him from you, if he's for sale. I'll need a couple of more horses, too. Got anything decent down at your place?"

Hammer was grinning all over. "I'll say I have. And I'll make you a good price on the black. I ain't one to take advantage of my neighbors, ain't that what you always say?"

"Exactly what I always say," Milo said. He mounted his own sorrel and when he rode off Hammer was still standing there, holding the black, scratching his head.

He went back to where the Wagon Tongue wagons were camped and he rode a circle and found what he was seeking on a little knoll that overlooked the valley. He dismounted and took off his hat and he stood there by the new grave.

"For five years I wanted to talk to you, Glen," he said aloud. "I always thought you were a great man. I think we could have got along."

"I'm sure you could have, Milo."

The soft voice startled him and when he turned Abigail Lacey was standing there, looking at him. She was dressed in simple black and she had some evergreen boughs in her hand. She walked toward him and she offered her hand.

He took it and held it and he started to cry. She put her arm around his shoulders and held him a long time and let him cry, comforting him as a mother might comfort a son.

Afterward he rode back to his own canyon and he tried to build himself a sort of camp but his heart wasn't in it. Something was wrong and he knew what it was, but damned if he was going to admit it. In time he gave up in

disgust. Maybe if he went back and saw her and really gave her a piece of his mind—

The sorrel gave a startled grunt when Milo dug in his heels.

He dismounted in front of the hotel and ran up the stairs and slammed open the door without knocking. Lily was in bed, propped up with half a dozen pillows. She was completely beautiful. She looked at him and there was no surprise in her eyes at all.

"You didn't buy that cameo for Margaret," she said.

"I never said I did, did I?"

"You said it was for a lady."

"Belle's a lady," he said gruffly. "It takes a lady to marry a man just because she loves him. It takes a lady to start out with nothing and build up to something—"

"And have babies." She was smiling, her lips parted and moist, her eyes dreamy.

"What?"

"I'm going to have a baby, Milo."

"You're *what?*"

"I just made up my mind," she said. "I'm going to have four. Two boys and two girls."

"Oh," he said, the breath running out of his lungs. "Now listen to me. There's a few things I want to tell you—"

"So you better marry me," she said.

"Now you just wait a minute—"

"Because if I have four children and I'm not married everybody is going to talk about it and it will cause a lot of confusion."

"I've had enough of your crazy talk—"

"I can cook, too," she said. "You'd be surprised."

"Didn't I tell you to shut up?"

"After we're married you won't have to think about a thing. I'll run the house and I'll run the ranch and I'll decide what cows to buy—"

"You'll do no such damn thing!" he yelled. "I'll give the orders around our place—"

"Oh Milo, you darling," she said, throwing up her arms. "Of course I'll marry you!"

She had her arms around his neck and she was pulling him down toward her and there wasn't a lot he could do about it. He could smell the scent of her skin and her lips were there waiting, full and red, and the room reeled around his head and in time he knew his cheeks were wet with her tears. He kissed her again and whispered against her lips.

"What's the matter? Why are you crying?"

"I told you once," she said, pressing her hand against the back of his head. "When a woman cries she's either happy or in love." She forced his head down and her lips reached up toward his, eagerly. "And sometimes she's both," she said. THE END

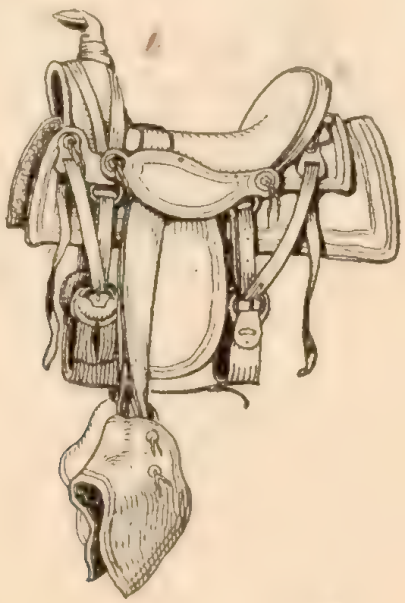
COWBOY OF THE PLAINS

By Jo Mora

THIS buster of the 1880's wears a very wide-brimmed sombrero, a shield-front flannel shirt, gauntlets, and fringed, close-legged chaps.

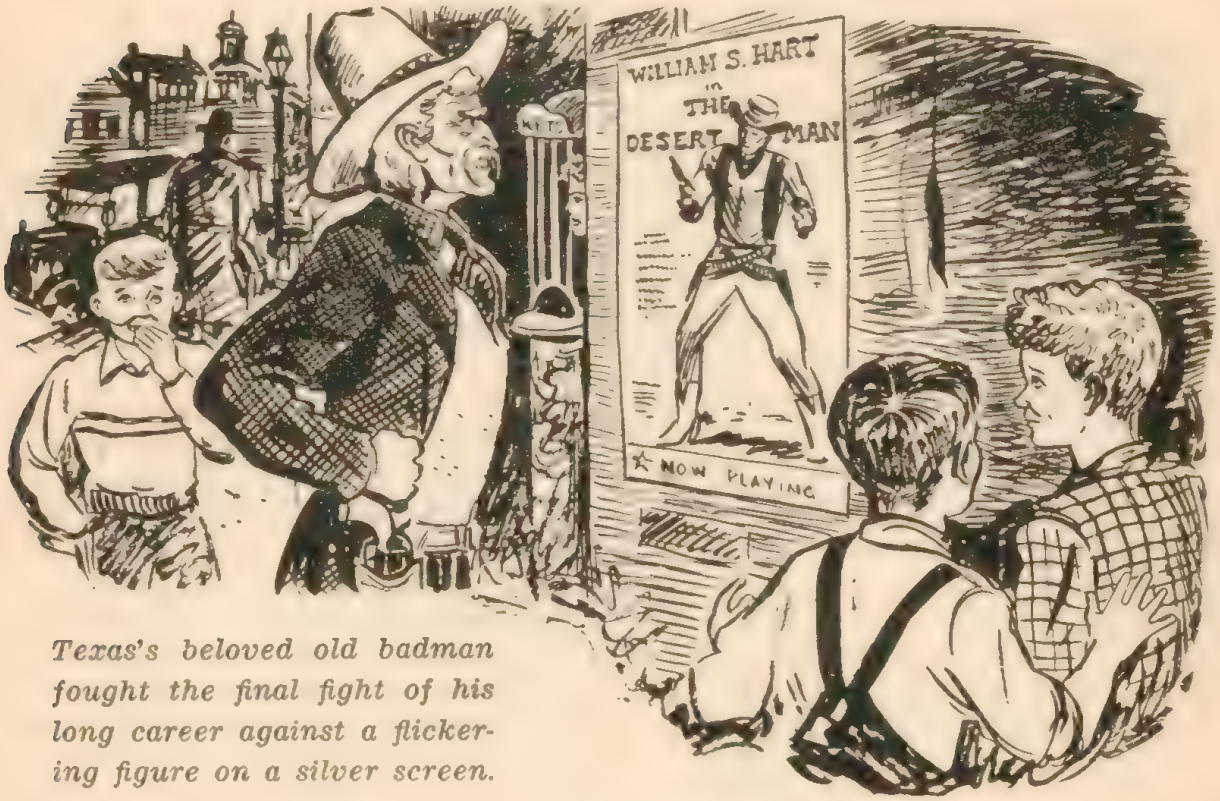
He is riding a half-pint mustang bronc no bigger than two-bits Mex, but he's plenty snakey when he takes to the air. These ponies were the backbone of the cow game in the Old West.

The vignette shows a typical saddle of that period with high, slick forks, the front cinch rigging wrapped around the horn and exposed. It has an open seat, roll cantle, and jockeys and upper skirts are in separate pieces.



The late Jo Mora was a man of many talents and interests, and perhaps the most versatile of Western artists. For nearly half a century he lived in the Southwest as ranch hand, cowboy, and student of Indian life. His paintings hang in many museums, and his murals and sculpture adorn public buildings throughout the West. He wrote and illustrated such fine books of the Old West as Californios *and* Trail Dust and Saddle Leather. *The pen and ink drawings presented here are characteristic of the artist's lively, explanatory skill.*

UNCLE BILL'S LAST BATTLE



Texas's beloved old badman fought the final fight of his long career against a flickering figure on a silver screen.

A True Story by Harold Preece

IT WAS a sorry epilogue for Uncle Bill Tarleton who had challenged marshals in the flesh to meet his end from a flickering image on a movie screen. Every man is entitled to the finish that becomes him. And, by rights, Uncle Bill should have gone out like his brother, Jim, who lay sleeping with the Old West in Boot Hill.

In their time, Bill and Jim had left their marks of remembrance from Tascosa to Tucson. Bat Masterson, whose judgment was expert, pronounced them as the deadliest pair of gunmen ever known in the West. Uncle Bill had survived, through the idiocy of fate, to become Texas's last honest-to-God living outlaw. That was a lonesome honor to carry in years grown shabbier than his scuffed, ancient boots and his tattered black string necktie.

For nobody in Austin much cared what Uncle Bill had been or what Bat Masterson had said. Powder and rawhide had birthed our town, but it had simmered down to a quiet community where folks heeded church bells on Sunday and job whistles on Monday. The bawdy old saloons had been converted into genteel Coke parlors and men who had been young apprentices of forgotten hell-roarers were now respectable barbers or bankers. Time

had whipped everybody into line. Everybody but Uncle Bill, keeping his whistle wet and his trigger cocked.

Only one concession had he made to a sorry age, and that only after much tactful persuasion from Police Chief George Murray. By a gentlemen's agreement between lawman and outlaw, the venerable old Walker Colt was never to be loaded.

I'd known Uncle Bill by sight all my life. I'd got used to seeing him hanging around Skinny Pryor's Wild West Playhouse, scowling at poster pictures of William S. Hart and Bronco Billy Anderson. But not till I was thirteen did I get involved to my ears in his feud with the cinema cowboys.

That was while I was working as after-school errand boy for the Governor, and saw Uncle Bill make his annual surrender. For each spring, the retired brigand claimed his measure of homage from his state. Newspapermen cooperated by giving the event a flash of publicity, figuring good-heartedly that they helped prolong the old bandit's life from one year to another.

Punctually at three, that day, Uncle Bill got up from his bench in the capitol grounds and walked in his bow-legged saddle stride to His Excellency's office. He stalked commandingly through the office door, paused to wink at the pretty receptionist, nodded to the reporters, then doffed his Stetson in a sweeping bow to the Governor.

"I'm Bill Tarleton, Governor. I come to give myself up and ask for a pardon."

His Excellency managed a frown above a grin. "You're a bad man, Tarleton," he answered as sternly as the comedy allowed. "Before I can consider a pardon, you'll have to stand trial on all your indictments. Duty requires now that I deliver you to the custody of the Texas Rangers."

With perfect timing, a Ranger strolled in, that minute, from the outfit's headquarters down the hall. He glowered at Uncle Bill as etiquette decreed. Glowering back, Uncle Bill handed the lawman his gun, butt first. The Ranger took it, ran his hand across its dozen rusty notches, and barked:

"You're under arrest, Tarleton, and there's not enough money in Texas to bail you out. That being the case, I'm paroling you on your word of honor to behave till you face a court of justice."

"You have my word, Cap'n," Uncle Bill drawled. Then the Ranger handed him back the gun.

"You've got a lot of enemies, Tarleton," he warned. "So many we can't guarantee to protect you. Better keep this in case somebody tries to dry-gulch you."

Uncle Bill replaced his gun and shook hands all around. Once again, he'd been confirmed officially as a bad hombre. Once again, Texas had made its obeisance to the Old West of which it had been such a lusty part. It made everybody feel good inside, even if every spectator except me looked a little bored from having seen the show before. Maybe thirteen is a ripe age for seeing things fresh.

"Geewhillikers!" I exploded after Uncle Bill had mosied out. "Was he really as bad as he makes out?"

The Governor chuckled. "Go read the history books. Or go ask him."

I sprinted from the office. As my eyes searched the huge corridor outside, I was in the throes of birthing an idea.

At Skinny Pate's bang-bang emporium, I'd seen William Farnum in a film called *The Lone Star Ranger*. The movie had a Texas Governor pardon-

ing a noted outlaw named Buck Duane on condition that Buck join the Rangers and hunt down his partners in the craft.

Uncle Bill was a sure-enough outlaw. One of these days, I meant to be governor for sure. Hadn't I barged in on His Excellency, announced calmly that I expected eventually to sit in his chair, then cheekily demanded that he start me in at the bottom learning the governing business?

Soon as I got elected, I'd pardon Uncle Bill and make him the head man of the Texas Rangers. Together, we'd cause every outlaw in our state to kiss hemp, just like that movie governor and Buck Duane. It didn't occur to me that most of our contemporary freebooters were onery brush-prowling hog thieves, easily nabbed by any country constable. And if I'd thought about it, it would have been irrelevant.

I spied Uncle Bill's broad, erect shoulders in the state treasury office. He was peering reminiscently through the cashier's window at the ancient iron vault inside. Time was when an armed corps of citizens had barely stopped the Tarleton boys from sacking that stronghold and appropriating four million dollars of state funds. But now, a treasury guard was carelessly sauntering over and offering the surviving Tarleton a chaw of tobacco instead of a snifter of lead.

I tapped Uncle Bill on the arm. He wheeled around, hand on gun.

"Don't like a feller coming on me sudden like that," he growled. Then he blinked his eyes slowly out of one century into another, from phantom faces of possemen to the admiring face of a boy.

"The big man's little sidekick," he rumbled. " 'Scuse me, sonny. Governor send you to tell me somep'n?"

I shook my head. "Nope, Uncle Bill. Just wanted to say you make me think of Buck Duane."

"Buck Duane—Buck Duane." Uncle Bill lifted his headpiece and scratched his bushy gray thatch. "Knowed 'em all, but don't seem to recollect him in Deadwood or Dodge. What bunch did he ride with?"

I wanted to tell Uncle Bill all about my hero, and let out that I expected him to follow in Buck's footsteps. But caution whispered I'd best lead up to that subject gradually.

"Buck Duane ain't no real man," I explained artlessly. "Just a man they put in a picture show."

Uncle Bill jumped nigh three feet. His boots, hitting the floor, sounded like the thud of gunshot on the Chisholm Trail. I started backing out the door, knowing now why men had called calf rope and run off scared when they got him riled.

But he was right in front of me, following me out, shaking a bony finger under my nose. "Picture-show cowboy!" he howled. "That's like stackin' me, Bill Tarleton, up ag'in' a two-bit hoss thief!"

He had me backed up against the framed painting of the Battle of San Jacinto on the lobby wall. My knees were knocking worse than any Mexican trooper's in that big Texas shootin' scrape.

"Now look, *Mr.* Bill," I pled. "Didn't go meanin' to upset you none. And please don't think I'm runnin' out on company. But Governor's got a lot o' chores waitin' for me."

I dodged around the side of him, and escaped in a long lope to the Governor's office. "Picture-show cowboy!—picture-show cowboy!" I could hear

him mumbling as I sped away.

That night, I told my ma about my run-in with the old gunman. She whaled the tar out of me for "getting chummy with that old reprobate, Bill Tarleton." Counting the welts on my bottom, I seriously doubted the qualifications of Uncle Bill to emulate Buck Duane.

During the next few days, I dodged Uncle Bill as nervously as any Jayhawk clodhopper who'd ever managed by good luck and God's grace to sidestep him in Kansas. I couldn't help passing him every blessed time the Governor sent me on some downtown errand. Invariably, I saw him sitting on his favorite bench across from the carved statue of the mounted Texas Ranger. But he paid me no mind while he snatched scraps of conversations with passers-by like the swarming pigeons from the dome snatching scraps of grub.

But there just wasn't no by-passing him one afternoon when his "target practice" perched him squarely across my path. Gun in hand, Uncle Bill had drawn a perfect bead on the stone lawman's forehead. He carefully wiped the gun with a lurid red bandanna and put it back in the holster as he glimpsed me from the tail of his eye.

"Time was," he addressed me real friendly-like, "when that son of a bullweed wouldn't have roosted up there 'thout Bill Tarleton bringin' him down."

"Yes sir, Mr. Bill," I let on politely. "He sure wouldn't. Governor told me to get back in a hurry. Good-by, Mr. Bill."

He grabbed my arm as I started to pass. "Don't run off mad, son. You couldn't help that little ruckus we had, raised up in bad times like you was. I jest don't like counterfeit cowboys any more'n I like counterfeit dollars. Thass all."

He pressed a shiny dime into my hands. I made a mental note it would pay my way, two Saturdays, at Skinny Pate's. Fear melted with resentment over that licking my benefactor had brought down on me.

"Them movie jaspers wouldn't know sagebrush from turnips," Uncle Bill observed sarcastically. "Saw two of 'em on a billboard loadin' their saddlebags with heavy gold when they had to make a quick gitaway from a bank bust."

His long, knifelike mustache bobbed in professional disdain. "Any yahoo woulda carried off just greenbacks if he had to haul the plunder more'n a couple o' miles. Why me and Jim—"

He stopped short. "Reckon I'm shootin' off my mouth too much. You workin' for the Governor, and me solicitin' a pardon. Might get back to him."

I felt proud to be let in, if only by hint, on an outlaw's secrets. "Don't make no difference what he does," I said loyally. "I'm gonna be governor, someday, and I'll pardon you." Right then, I had a flickering hope that Uncle Bill might still turn out like Buck Duane.

The bad man was the only adult who hadn't snickered when I'd announced my candidacy. "Well, that's mighty accommodatin' o' you, pardner," he answered respectfully. "What might be your handle?"

When I told him my name, he rolled it over and over like the makin's in the brown cigarette paper his fingers were fumbling with.

"Preece—Preece. Any kin to old Ranger Dick Preece?"

"Yep, my granddad," I bragged.

Uncle Bill's mind rolled back across

generations gone with the buffalo and the wild pigeon to more scrapes than any scenario writer ever dreamed of.

"Fine feller, Dick," he mused. "Ran me from the Trinity River to the Red. And when he wasn't runnin' me, I was runnin' him. Made it more sociable that way."

That wasn't the way it had come down in the legendry of my tribe. But you can hardly tell who ran who when an old-timer tells it.

Anyhow, unknown to my elders, I picked up with Uncle Bill where my grandpa had left off, if in a naïvely different way. Fortunately, Granddad, who'd been a Methodist elder as well as a Ranger, was no longer around to put thumbs down on the man he'd worn out three horses chasing.

Looking back on it, I reckon Uncle Bill set my life, just beginning, on a brand-new turn. I've always said that it was his tales that started me off toward being a word wrangler instead of a vote wrangler. And I've always wished that I'd had sense enough to scribble down every epic yarn he told me.

But as a fair swap, I put something new in his life, winding up like a lariat that's lost its zip. Even if it was something he only cussed. Even though the giving just made him cuss that much harder.

Our chummiñess might not have lasted long if I hadn't lost that dime he gave me as peacemaker. Or, maybe, I yielded to the temptation of gum drops on Tuesday, figuring that Saturday would take care of itself.

But come Saturday, I trudged down to Skinny Pate's movie house just the same. Skinny was a generous cuss who often found ways of letting you earn your show fare if you were minus the necessary nickle. He might let you tote him a sandwich from the Pride of Texas Confectionery up the street. Or else he'd assign you to help Albert, the porter, drape covers on seats.

It was early afternoon. I was hanging around the theater with other insolvent urchins, waiting a summons from Skinny's beckoning finger. Uncle Bill hove in sight, carrying his customary load and not on his back. He stopped to glare at the billboard proclaiming the feature—William S. Hart in *The Desert Man.*

"Hell's cinders!" he bellowed. "Closest that dad-gum son of a cross-eyed crawfish ever got to a desert was a piece of sandpaper."

Right that minute, he glimpsed us kids. "Why, howdy, Preece youngun!" he bawled. "If you tads wanta see that pack o' trash, why don't you go on in?"

Feet fidgeted. Eyes looked to me because he'd addressed me by name. I grabbed the bull by his horns, or rather Uncle Bill by his heart.

"It's like this, pardner," I said in my best Old West. "Our lasso don't stretch far enough for the drag. In plain words, we ain't gotta stake."

Uncle Bill stared dubiously at the somber face of William S. Hart, and a mite sympathetically at the hopeful faces of us gamins.

His hand reached in his pants pocket, and we heard change rattling uncertainly. "'Tain't fitten amusement for young folks," he commented to himself. Then he threw his shoulders back with a jerk.

"By thunder! I ain't never turned a man down for whisky or kids for lemonade!" He flung a handful of nickles toward Skinny Pate in the box.

"Set 'em up for my friends, you danged old lie peddler!" Then he

slapped down a quarter. "And I ain't never bought the drinks 'thout bein' a gent and drinkin' myself. Hand me one of them cuss-fired tickets!"

The other kids rushed in with a whoop. Something told me I ought to stick with Uncle Bill. He might need me.

We walked in on a big close-up of a sheriff aiming a Colt .45 straight at the audience. Right away, Uncle Bill's hand plunged for his gun.

I grabbed the hand right quick. "Sh! Uncle Bill," I whispered. "Take it easy. 'Tain't nothin' but a picture show."

"Reckon you're right, son," he apologized. "But I allus draw when I see a sheriff."

He stood there blinking at the screen, at the darkened rows of seats and the old tin-pan mechanical piano banging away. His eyes were trying to figure the lay like it was a new trail he hadn't rode before. Right then and there, I realized something. It was the first time that Uncle Bill had ever seen a movie.

But from that day, Texas's deadliest desperado became its most articulate if most biased movie critic. And for the first time since movies got started in Texas, the villain had somebody to root for him.

Every Saturday, Uncle Bill showed up with a handful of nickles at Skinny Pate's to treat his ever-growing mob of guests. I've seen him plunk down seventy coins for seventy kids. He never turned no young-un away. And none but booed him after accepting his bounty—for Uncle Bill's running commentaries were as bothersome as brushing teeth.

Minute the hero's manly face was flashed on the screen, the kids would start cheering and Uncle Bill would start cussin'. Minute the villain made his debut, the kids would hiss and Uncle Bill would hurrah. As the plot progressed, the show always turned into a grim endurance contest between kids and Bill.

"Git 'em!" the young-uns would yell encouragement to the proverbial posses hoofing after the proverbial rustlers. "Round 'em up when they hit that creek!"

"Scatter, pardners!" Uncle Bill would bawl to his fraternity brothers. "Make that dang posse break up so you can pick 'em off single like peckerwoods. That's the way I handled 'em in the Dakotas!"

He yipped with joy when a sheriff got plugged, and cussed blue streaks at outlaws who reformed. I kind of lost hope he'd ever follow after Buck Duane when I heard him so many times damning renegades from the craft as "low-down brush poppers not worth the lead to plug 'em."

But his pet anathema was a serial that ran endlessly called *Death Valley Daredevils*. Somehow, Uncle Bill never got the hang of those continued pictures. It flustered him mighty to see the hero come up kicking at the beginning of one chapter after plunging toward doom at the close of the last.

"Reckon that winds up that tinhorn," he'd smack his lips joyfully as an episode's end showed the champion of law pinned under a rock or bouncing down a canyon's sides like a softball. But, next week, he'd watch in stark amazement as the Good Guy was resurrected intact. And then his own colleagues came in for scathing professional criticism.

"Damn it!" he'd roar at the bandits. "You couldn't drill a maverick with its tail tied to your saddle horn."

His voice would descend to a grumble: "When Bill Tarleton killed a star-flasher, by dogies, he stayed killed."

Uncle Bill grew rustier with his gun as he sat through one thriller after another. But his largess to the kids kept increasing along with their impatience of him. On Armistice Day, 1919, he laid down one hundred and two nickles—all of his night's winnings at four-bit ante in the back room of Lou Rankin's junky furniture store.

Yet kids proved more drastic than sheriffs. No star-flasher could mow him down, but they learned to howl him down when he horned in on some smashing climax that had everybody jumping from his seat.

"Pipe down, Grandpa," they'd shriek back in one voice. "Shove in the stopper so we can watch the show!"

It was the kind of talk no self-respecting gunman would have taken off anybody his size in Deadwood or Dodge. But Uncle Bill took it off squirts in his home town. When it got too much for him, he'd rise up, cuss under his breath at the movie cowboys, and stalk majestically toward the exit. Soon as he hit the street, he'd head for a certain back door where a blazing old buckie could still get a jigger in spite of that parching drouth called prohibition.

Along about the time Harding was elected president, Hollywood ground out a batch of features based on alleged incidents in the lives of famous Westerners. Uncle Bill, as an uncrowned historian, took it on himself to pass expert judgment for authenticity.

One of the first films was about Buffalo Bill. Uncle Bill picked up the tab for sixty kids to see it. That Saturday, our host was unusually quiet as he sprawled down in his seat. His eyes were glued to the screen, his mind piecing together far-off, forgotten things till the picture reached a lead-spitting finale that had the young-uns screaming in ecstasy.

Suddenly Uncle Bill jumped up, posted himself right in front of the screen, and began bawling:

"It's a damn, dirty lie. Buffalo Bill never was in that kind of ruckus. I damn well oughta know 'cause I backed him in many a play."

"Sit down, Grandpop, you're blockin' the view!" one kid howled. A spitball came hurling from somewhere. It missed Uncle Bill but socked Buffalo Bill neatly in the eye.

What then followed must have been pre-arranged. Fifty rubber-band sling shots appeared from as many kid pockets. Paper wads from the slings peppered his cheeks and brow. Chalk from other hands lambasted his nose and cheeks.

He stood there facing it without a quiver. Facing it without flinching, as he had the bullets of Doc Holliday's wolf pack, one night in Tombstone. Just once, his hand strayed toward his gun. Then he remembered the size of his opponents. He folded his arms proudly. And only his eyes showed the contempt of a flaming, lost era for a law-broke new one.

I sat in open-mouthed adoration of the nerviest man I'd ever seen. My eyes were witnessing the Old West at bay. Seeing it make a gallant, foredoomed stand against its imitation and the worshipers of that imitation.

The missiles stopped when Skinny Pate came storming in. And the man who ran that temple of the imitation paid tribute to that which was real. He took Uncle Bill by the shoulder.

"My dad rode the Chisholm Trail with you, Bill," he said. "And no harm's coming to you on my premises. Go on out and get some fresh air."

Uncle Bill strode forward and yanked me out of my seat. It was the first time I'd ever heard his voice quaver like other elderly folks'.

"Mosey out with me, Preece boy. I'm a lonesome old feller. And 'tain't many that wants to listen to me."

I walked up Congress Avenue in a daze, letting him ramble on about Buffalo Bill and Bat Masterson hiding him in a hay wagon to save him from Jayhawker vigilantes after he'd shot the sheriff at Hays City and been badly wounded himself. Seemed like the girl who'd nursed a young Texas hellion back to life had been Bat's sweetheart. And love had caused a lawman to risk his life for an outlaw. A pretty yarn. But I suspected there'd been more between that girl and Uncle Bill than chivalry allowed him to let on.

He was too lonesome to let me go when we got to his room over a greasy old grocery store. It was the first time I'd ever seen an outlaw's hangout. I stared in fascination at the many pictures of Uncle Bill I saw tacked on the walls. After I'd brushed away clinging cobwebs, I saw that every blessed one of them had the word WANTED printed in big, black type; and every one of 'em offered some kind of reward for Bill Tarleton dead or alive.

Uncle Bill sat down on an old iron cot and produced a battered old cigar box from somewhere.

"Thought you might like to see my keepsakes," he said, opening the box. He pulled out a dented and rusted tin star.

"This is the badge I shot off the Hays City sheriff," he narrated. "There's my bullet nick—right there. Kinda hated to plug him, but he just wouldn't let a man have his runnin' iron in peace out there on the range."

Next followed a strand of hemp. "Piece of the rope they hung Cherokee Bill on in old Hangin' Judge Isaac Parker's jail at Fort Smith. Judge swung eighty-eight fellers all told. I was marked for number eighty-nine when I lassoed a bull and rode him back across Red River into Texas. And that after the gol-dam posse had shot my hoss out from under me."

He grinned just a little when he held up a pair of mouse-chewed women's hose.

"Them's Belle Starr's stockings," he drawled. " 'Tain't for a little feller like you to know how I got 'em."

I was on to more than Uncle Bill gave me credit for. But pictures that I've seen of gotch-lipped Madame Starr since make me wonder what she had that lured both Cole Younger and Bill Tarleton.

I'd expected that the gang-up on Uncle Bill would end the Saturday picture-show sessions. No, sir. He'd never been scared to return to any place where he'd been shot up or shot at. He was right there in the theater lobby, next Saturday, spinning his yarns of the real West to the bored kids, who listened only till the doors should open for another view of the sham West.

Except that he now kept his opinions to himself. You never heard a cheep save a disapproving little grunt when some movie cowboy straddled a bronc without first cinching his saddle strings. The truce between Old West and Young Texas lasted till that memorable day when Uncle Bill finally bowed out altogether as critic and com-

mentator.

He was hitting eighty-three when Skinny Pate booked a film purporting to be the life story of that strictly second-rate outlaw, Pete Jennings. Pleasant memories gave our first-rater the idea that the picture would be about his old friend, Gus Jennings—one lawman for whom he felt tenderly disposed.

By good gunplay, Uncle Bill had once saved Gus Jennings's carcass in a saloon scrape at Laredo. Gus had returned the favor after getting to be a Ranger. He'd looked the other way when his deliverer had crossed the Rio Grande with a border marshal uncomfortably close behind.

Now Uncle Bill looked forward to reunion with Gus; if only on a movie reel. On the evening before the showing, the old freebooter dropped into the speakeasy for a few nightcaps. As he dozed over his cups, a prankster stole out his gun, loaded it with three blank cartridges, then jammed it back in the holster without Uncle Bill ever waking up.

But the badman was on hand bright and early when Skinny Pate opened the next forenoon. He was too happy to look at the posters or to notice the name on them. Reading wasn't his long suit, anyhow.

"This show won't be loco doin's, boys," he bragged to the kids. "You're gonna see a gen-u-wyne picture show with a gen-u-wyne Westerner. Old Gus Jennings—fine a feller as ever cocked a Colt."

Skinny Pate had bawled us out so hard about the sling-shot bombardment that none of us had the nerve to tell Uncle Bill he'd lassoed the wrong limb of the Jennings tree. As it was, he drowsed off in his seat till our whistles and catcalls brought on the show.

Uncle Bill awoke to see the flicker dots dancing on the screen. He scratched his head wonderingly when he first glimpsed the figure leering down at him.

"Shore don't look much like Gus," he commented loudly. "But men start changin' when they git along in years—"

"Uncle Bill's tuned up," a kid groaned just as loud.

The young-uns, for the first time in months, were starting their off-program act of howling him down. Uncle Bill heard nary a boo, but got up and walked slowly down the aisle. His jaw dropped as recognition came.

"'Tain't Gus," he announced in a hurt way. "It's that dang saddle bum, Pete Jennings. He's so dern yellow he couldn't stop a burro cart with a kindlin' stick."

The kids booed again. Uncle Bill stayed put, gaping and mumbling till the film unwound to the Jennings gang looting a Rock Island express car. Then Uncle Bill stood up tall, like the old days. And his voice had the ring of all the battles ever fought in the Old West.

"It's a blasted lie!" he shouted. "A track hand scared the whole blasted bunch off with a lantern."

His hand sprang to the ancient gun. Smoke spat at the screen. Young-uns stampeded out of the place. Uncle Bill fired again. But Pete Jennings went on with the business of train robbing, paying no mind to a challenger from whom many a better man had backed down in many a pinch.

Through the smoke fog, the professional made out the amateur trussing up the express guard. Uncle Bill's hands were shaking as Pete finished

the job unscathed.

"Oughta drilled him cold that close," Uncle Bill muttered.

He checked his gun, wondering for the first time who'd loaded it. But no use questioning what came natural. For the third time, Uncle Bill aimed and fired. For the third time, Pete Jennings answered shot with smirk.

Uncle Bill slumped down heavily in a seat. Gunsmoke was trailing from the theater and out on the street when two policemen, flanked by Skinny Pate, charged into the deserted place.

They found the Terror of Dodge sniffing like a baby, his last shot gone, his eyes gazing stupidly at the amateur riding off with the swag.

"My gun's no good no more," he said dully when a bluecoat shook him by the shoulder. "And I ain't no good either. Can't even drop a lyin'-tongued varmint like Pete Jennings at measly six paces."

Skinny Pate told the police to let him go. Uncle Bill mumbled something about violating his parole and having to surrender to the Rangers. He started off toward the capitol, but somehow he never got there.

I reckon he wasn't one to give in because his trigger aim was gone, and his shoulders all of a sudden looked stooped and beat like any other old man's in Texas. Just 'twasn't no way to finish a saga like his.

Somebody around the capitol thought to miss him when he was absent from his bench for two days straight. Maybe it was me, but I don't remember right. Whoever it was notified Skinny Pate, and Skinny went with Lou Rankin to Uncle Bill's room.

The two found him lying dead on the old cot, boots on if not boots up. His shootin' iron, neatly polished like the boots, was right beside him. Around the gun lay his souvenirs—neatly arranged at exact spaces apart.

The sheriff's star—Cherokee Bill's neck strand—and Belle Starr's stockings.

Skinny Pate saw something that had been crumpled and thrown contemptuously on the floor. He picked it up, looked at it closely, and let out a sigh.

It was a yellowed stub from a movie ticket.

SOURDOUGH HOSPITALITY

DURING a spring work in west-central Arizona, a *Quien Sabe* rider came into camp one night talking to himself. During the day's riding he had stopped at a trap-corral windmill to water. An old prospector was camped at the windmill and extended the usual invitation to " 'light an' eat."

The fare was simple and adequate: beans, baking-powder dough-gods, and coffee that would float a horseshoe. The rider was working his way through a generous plate of *frijoles* when he uncovered the skeletal remains of a well-cooked lizard.

"Looky here, Hardrock," he complained to his host, "they's a lizard in these beans!" He held out his plate for inspection.

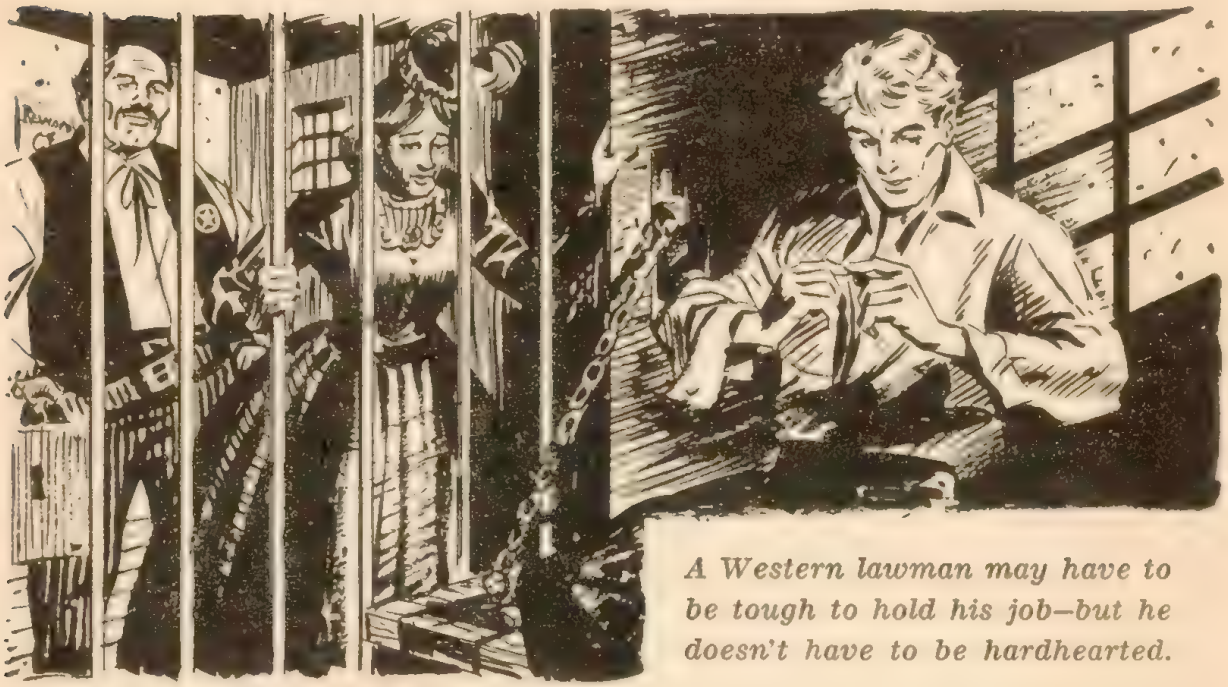
The hospitable old fellow viewed the evidence with tranquillity.

"Hell," said he, "they gits in ev'ythin', don't they? Th'ow 'em out, son, an' take some more—pot's still ha'f-full!"

—OLD HUTCH

A MIRACLE IN HIS HOLSTER

By JOSEPH CHADWICK



A Western lawman may have to be tough to hold his job—but he doesn't have to be hardhearted.

IT TAKES a tough man to be a Western peace officer, and I guess a lot of folks, especially Eastern folks, have got the idea that only a man without a heart would pin a star to his shirt front. But there's a difference between toughness and heartlessness. Me, I know. I wear a badge sometimes, myself. But only as a deputy; this story ain't about me.

It's about a better man, a man with plenty of heart—and, sure, plenty of guts. You've maybe heard about him, or read about him. Sheriff Pat Monahan, the man who finally hunted down that mad-dog killer, the Brazos Kid.

Most everybody knows about how the Kid was trapped. The newspapers everywhere made a big fuss about it, for even while he was still living—and killing—the Brazos Kid was thought of as a sort of Robin Hood. Humans are plumb foolish, making heroes of his kind. But the trapping of the Kid wasn't as fancy as has been printed and told. And reprinted and retold. Me, I know that too. I was in on it at the end, with a badge pinned to my coat and a gun in my hand. And a quivery feeling in my guts. I was only twenty-one then, the same age as the Brazos Kid, but no gun-crazy killer like him.

Sure, he did some shooting—a lot of it—at the end. But he wasn't, like has been claimed, anxious to go out in a blaze of glory. The truth is, he folded up at the last minute—and long before he'd "spent his last shell," like the newspapers said.

It was a dark and stormy night, a

week-day night. I was surprised to see the sheriff in the middle of the week. Mostly, he only came out to his Lazy-M Ranch on week-ends when he was free to leave his office. It was just a two-bit spread, and I was the whole crew. I was glad to see him, since it got lonely at the Lazy-M a lot of the time, but I saw that he was worried as soon as he came into the one-room 'dobe ranch house.

I set out a pair of cups, filled them from the coffeepot I always had on the fire. The sheriff sat down at the plank table without taking off his wet hat and slicker. He drank his coffee, sat there worrying, and I didn't talk any, either.

Finally he heaved a sigh, and said, "Danny, pin on that deputy's badge I gave you. I've got another job for you." He shoved back his bench and stood up, a big man and, yes, a handsome man. "Danny," he said, "we're going after the Kid tonight."

My mouth fell open. No doubt my eyes popped. He smiled faintly, beneath that neat sorrel mustache of his.

"Yeah, Danny," he said. "The Kid. I know where he is, and tonight I'm getting him. I've a hunch I can take him alive. That's why I'm taking you alone, instead of a bunch of trigger-jumpy possemen. I want somebody siding me that I can trust to obey orders in a pinch." He paused, gave me a searching look out of steel-gray eyes. "It's not an order, though. If you'd rather stay out of it—"

"I'll get my deputy's badge," I said.

I got my badge, my six-shooter, my rifle. I blew out the lamp flame, and we went out into the stormy dark. I saddled my blue-roan gelding in the barn, then we set out and headed northwest toward the hills. There was some rain; it came in splattering showers, but mostly the storm was just wind. But it was a black, black night. It wasn't the kind of night to go hunting an outlaw like the Brazos Kid. But no night was that kind of night, it seemed to me. I was scared.

I wasn't much. Or anyway I didn't feel like much of a man. Sure, Sheriff Pat Monahan had tried to shape me to be like him. But when they made Pat Monahan they threw the mold away. He'd taken me in when I was a wee kid. I don't remember his coming upon me, but he had told me the story.

He was scouting for the Army in those days, and he'd come upon an emigrant outfit that had been jumped by the Apaches. The emigrants had been killed, a man and his wife. The wagon had been burned, the horses run off. A three-year-old kid had been somehow a survivor. Pat found the kid in a brush-grown gully. There was nothing left to tell who the emigrants had been, and the kid only knew that his name was Danny.

He'd taken me to an Army post, and for a couple years I'd lived with an officer and his wife. Later, Pat had boarded me with a Mexican family in Tucson. I'd been twelve when he bought his ranch, and fifteen when he got to be sheriff of Shasta County. He'd told me, the day he took office, "From now on, you're ramrod of the Lazy-M." I'd been that, for it wasn't much of a cow outfit. Not yet, anyway. But we had plans.

Now, riding to catch the worst killer in the southwest, I wasn't feeling like much of a man. It was Pat Monahan's silent mood, his worried look, that helped scare me.

After maybe an hour, I said, "Sheriff, you scared?"

It took a while for my question to get through his thoughts. "Scared?" he said finally. "No, there's nothing to be scared of, Danny. I've been after the Kid for so long that I know too much about him to be afraid of him. It's like that old saying about familiarity breeding contempt, I guess. No, I'm not scared of that Brazos Kid."

"You seemed worried."

"I am worried. But not about either of us being gunned down tonight."

"Oh?"

He swung his horse closer to mine, lifted his voice above the howling of the wind and the beat of the rain. "All this excitement about the Kid," he said, and for once he was complaining about something. "No sense to it. The whole country worked up about an ornery son who would have been better off if he'd never been born. Killed his first man when he was fourteen. Killed a dozen or more since—and, like he brags, 'not counting Mexes.' And now he's a wonder. A damn' hero. Robbing the rich and giving to the poor! So a lot of people—too many people—think."

He seldom talked so much, and there was disgust in his voice. He went on:

"He's killed time and again for no good reason. Hired out his gun in a range war. Steals horses in the Territory, sells them in Texas. Steals horses in Texas, sells them in the Territory. Give to the poor? Sure, he shells out money when he needs a place to hide out—"

He went on griping about the Kid. About how the Kid, who did have a way about him, made friends among the Mexican population of the Territory—yet killed Mexicans on impulse and wronged the daughters of Mexicans. It wasn't often that Pat Monahan showed anger, but he was gripped by rage now. I didn't savvy it.

"All this fuss," he said. "People everywhere excited about this Brazos Kid. Mothers whose sons have disappeared thinking that maybe this killer might be theirs— It's hell, I tell you."

I still didn't savvy. "What do you mean, Sheriff?"

He told it then, what was worrying him. "A woman arrived in town day before yesterday. Came all the way from Philadelphia. A fine woman, Danny. Her son disappeared eight years ago, when he was thirteen. Ran off after he got into trouble at school. Beat up another boy, almost killed him. Only one trace of him was ever found. He'd joined a circus that was playing Philadelphia, but he'd left it by the time his parents caught up with it. They spent thousands of dollars trying to find him. Now that she's read in the Philadelphia papers about the Brazos Kid, she thinks that the Kid might be her son. In fact, she's sure of it."

I waited, not saying anything.

"I guess she doesn't want him to be, in her heart," Pat Monahan went on, "but she's a mother and she's got to make sure. Her husband is sick, and couldn't come with her. She had to have somebody come with her, so she has the family lawyer along. His name is Blakely. She's a Mrs. Naylor."

"Well, the Kid couldn't be her son, Sheriff."

"Why not, Danny?"

"He claims his real name is Smith."

"Lot of men call themselves Smith."

"But—"

"He's her son, Danny," said Sheriff Pat Monahan.

It hit me hard. Somehow I'd never thought of the Brazos Kid as ever having had a mother. Not that I'd considered it, but I'd taken it for granted

that, like me, he'd been picked up all by himself in some place of horror where there was nothing but blood and smoldering ashes. Nobody that I knew of ever wondered about the Kid's origin; everybody just knew that he *was*.

"How do you know for sure, Sheriff?" I asked, shaken. "Does she have a picture of him? Even if she does, he can't look much now like he did at thirteen. He's a tough, mean, wild-looking cuss."

"She's got a photograph. It doesn't look like the Kid does now."

"Then—?"

"Mrs. Naylor is sure it's her son," the sheriff said. "She feels it. Women are like that, Danny. But she'll need proof. The lawyer will demand proof. There are some identifying marks, she and the lawyer say. A crescent-shaped scar on her son's left forearm and a birthmark on his back. I didn't tell them, Danny, but the Kid has the scar and the birthmark."

It was an awful thing, a mother finding out that her long-lost son was the Brazos Kid. If she was the sort of woman that Pat Monahan claimed, she wouldn't think the Kid a hero. His bloodstained back trail must give her nightmares, I thought. It was clear why the sheriff was worried. He was a sensitive man, and he couldn't stand the thought of Mrs. Naylor finding out for sure that the Brazos Kid was her flesh and blood.

"Better if she could go on not knowing what became of her son," he said, thinking aloud rather than talking to me. "To have her come face to face with that whelp—a sad thing. But what can I do? This is the first chance at him in more than a year. No lawman will get a better chance at him. If I don't take it, he'll go his way—and maybe take more lives."

"Maybe we'll have to kill him, Sheriff."

"That won't solve the problem."

"Dead, he won't cause her any grief."

"She'll have the memory of him, if we kill him tonight or he hangs later. If only there was some way of keeping her from finding out—"

There wasn't any way that I could think of, so I kept quiet.

The sheriff didn't say anything more, either, and we rode through the night with the wind taking swipes at us and the rain splattering us now and then. It was a long ride, wherever we were going; or it seemed long to me, since the inky darkness made it blind going. But when we came to the bridge across Sarbo Creek, in the Muleshoe Hills, I knew our destination. The Ortega *rancho*. The Kid was known to be friends with the Ortegas.

TWO lamplighted windows in the Ortega house glittered like bright jewels in a tinhorn gambler's stickpin. We reined in at first sight of them, and Pat Monahan said, low-voiced:

"Leave the Kid to me, Danny. You're along to keep the Ortegas out of it. Maybe they won't side him. But if they do, you'll know how to handle them. Don't bother about the Kid. You savvy, Danny?"

I said, "Sure, Pat," and pulled my rifle from its scabbard.

We drifted in on the place, easy-like, and above the drumming of the rain that made the lighted windows glitter there was the sound of some people having a rowdy good time. We heard the music of a guitar and of a mouth organ, and I remembered having heard that the Brazos Kid played a mouth

organ. We heard laughing voices, one a woman's.

Pat Monahan motioned, and I pulled my roan horse up at the edge of the ranchyard. I tied a knot in the reins, then levered a cartridge into the firing chamber of my Winchester. I watched the sheriff ride closer to the house, and dismount. I was jumpy, but not too scared. Pat's hunch that neither of us would be shot down had taken the sharp edge off my fear.

As Pat moved to the ranch-house door, I thought of the woman he'd told me about—the Kid's mother. And I wished that tonight wouldn't be the night he was caught or killed. It seemed better that he should escape, so she wouldn't get to know for sure that he was her boy. But then I thought that if he did get away from us, he might—tomorrow, next week, next month—kill again. And then it seemed better that he be taken, no matter what sorrow it caused Mrs. Naylor.

Pat Monahan didn't knock on the door. He tripped the latch and flung it open, and stepped into the doorway. His gun was in his hand, but it wasn't his gun that blasted as the music and laughter died. It was the Kid's. The outlaw must have dropped his mouth organ and grabbed for his gun all in one swift motion, firing as it cleared leather.

The sheriff reeled back out of the doorway, away from its light, and it seemed that he was hit. But he was unharmed, just moving back into the ranchyard to catch the Kid, who had run out a back door after firing that one wild shot. He ran like a deer. He was just a fast-moving shadow to my eyes.

Pat Monahan saw him, of course, but still held his fire. He yelled:

"Kid, it's Monahan! Kid, you may as well give up!"

The Kid's gun blazed again, and the roar of the shot thundered in my ears. But he was shooting as he ran, and his aim was a mile off. The barn door was open, and he ducked into the building. A couple men came running from the Ortega house, and I swung my rifle up and fired a warning shot over their heads. A woman screamed inside, and the two men ducked back and slammed the door. I watched the windows, but nobody appeared at them. They didn't even douse the light. They must have hit the floor, scared by the shot I'd fired.

The Kid came riding from the barn. His horse had been waiting saddled. He headed straight at the sheriff, aiming to ride him down.

Pat Monahan shouted, "Kid, I gave you a chance!"

He fired then, almost point-blank.

The Kid's horse spooked, reared high, and somehow the Brazos Kid was thrown. He landed in a loose heap, but was quickly up. He grabbed for his horse, but the animal shied away. The Kid cursed wildly. He whirled, started to run again, and came up against the corral fence. He put his back to the fence, and fired twice more at the sheriff. And missed both shots.

Pat Monahan said, his voice harsh now as his patience ran out, "Kid, I don't like to kill—but I'm going to kill you sure if you don't drop your gun!" He started walking toward the cornered outlaw.

The Kid had fired four shots. He had two more shells in the gun in his hand, and there was a loaded gun in his second holster. But his nerve broke. He made whimpering sounds, like a hurt little boy. He sagged there against the

corral fence and let Pat Monahan snap the handcuffs on his wrists.

WE RODE away from the Ortega place with the Kid between us, and the sheriff said, "I'm obliged to you, Danny. I knew I could count on you to obey orders. And I won't forget it."

His words made me feel good; praise from a man like Pat Monahan was praise indeed. But the fine feeling didn't last, and we didn't talk at all during the ride to town. Both of us were thinking about the woman who was the Kid's mother, and that made us feel pretty low.

What thoughts ran through our prisoner's head I don't know. Maybe the Brazos Kid and all his kind, before and since, can't really think like normal folks. Maybe their minds are too warped for thinking, for reasoning things out, for seeing the difference between right and wrong. Impulses take the place of thoughts. Wild impulses that drive them into acting like lobo wolves.

We saw the lights of town—mighty few lights at that hour of night—before anybody spoke again. It was the Kid who spoke, in a sort of empty voice: "What'll happen to me, Sheriff?" So it seemed that he could worry, even if he couldn't think straight.

Pat Monahan showed then that he didn't lack a heart, for instead of telling the Kid straight out that he would surely hang, he said, "Pray if you can, Kid. You know any prayers? Your mother ever teach you any?"

The Kid sneered.

"Prayers? You makin' fun of me, Sheriff?"

"Remember your mother, Kid?"

"Naw."

"Ever think of her?"

"Hell, no," the Kid said, his tone mocking. "When I think of a woman, it sure ain't my old lady. You know, Sheriff; I don't think your jail is going to hold me. There ain't no jail can hold the Brazos Kid. And if there was one—well, I got friends who'll sure help me bust out."

"Don't count on it, son."

"Maybe," said the Kid, laughing, "I'll pray my way out."

He had a mean way of laughing. It was a jarring sound, not a pleasant one like laughter should be. And it must have been his laugh that convinced the sheriff that there was no use talking to him about his mother or anybody else. There was no hope for such a person. He'd cry for his life at his trial, and he'd curse his friends for not saving him when he climbed the thirteen steps to the gallows. He'd scream and he'd curse when the noose was placed about his neck. He wouldn't think about anybody but himself, and that he was right and had always been right, to the very last. And if somehow he should make a break, he'd start killing again— No, he wasn't to be given a chance to break jail. It had to be the gallows for the Brazos Kid.

And his mother would know. She'd have the memory of it as long as she lived.

We drifted into town as quietly as we'd approached the Ortega *rancho*. In our town, in those days, the courthouse and jail were combined in an old plank building that once had housed a store on the first floor and the storekeeper's living-quarters upstairs. A big room on the second floor had been turned into a cell block; there were six tiny cells with bars at the small windows and iron-bar doors.

We took the Kid up there, and locked him in the cell at the rear. There were no other prisoners just then. We went downstairs to the sheriff's office, and we were both tired from the strain of what had happened.

Pat Monahan said, "We got in without anybody knowing it. But by morning everybody in town and most of the county will know we've got him. There's apt to be trouble. His so-called friends will try to break him out if they figure I can be bluffed. And there are a lot of hombres who may get the notion of lynching him." He sighed tiredly. "We'll be on watch for any kind of trouble, Dan. You take the horses to the livery barn, then come back here and get some sleep while you've still got a chance."

I did as he told me, sleeping in the little room off from his office. A roaring sound woke me when the sun was slanting in through the east window. The roar came from the voices of a great crowd of people. I jumped up, went into the office, looked out the window.

There was a crowd of three, four hundred people in the street. Mostly men, but a lot of women and some children. For a minute or so I thought it was an angry mob, angry either at our having caught the Kid or at the Kid himself. Then I discovered those people weren't voicing threats. They were just excited, and noisy because of it. There wasn't a thing for them to see, but they were hoping they would see something. They were hoping there would be some excitement that they could have a hand in. People are plumb loco, sometimes.

Pat Monahan said, "That's nothing to worry about, Danny. Some of them might want to break the Kid out. Some others might want to lynch him. But most of them don't know what they want. I've got four good men with shotguns deputized. They're out front, showing everybody that we're not going to let any trouble get started."

I faced him. He hadn't slept all night, I knew, but he didn't look tired now. Just worried. I asked, "Mrs. Naylor coming to see him?"

"She's bound to."

"Maybe you could refuse to let her see him."

"No—somehow I couldn't do that."

A man appeared at the office doorway, hesitated there, saying, "Busy, Sheriff?"

I knew that he was Mrs. Naylor's lawyer. He looked like an Easterner, like a big city man. He wasn't young. He had a white mustache. Our oldish men have seamed, leathery faces from being out in the sun and wind so much. But this man had a pinkish complexion, and his face bore only a few tiny wrinkles. He was tall and straight and distinguished-looking. He was wearing a narrow-brimmed black hat, a black coat, gray trousers. Gloves too. And he was carrying a gold-knobbed cane. Our lawyers in the Territory weren't anything like this Philadelphia lawyer, and if I'd needed a lawyer bad, I would have wanted him defending me than a dozen of ours.

Pat Monahan was taken by him, too. He showed that by rising and saying, "Come in, sir."

Mr. Blakely came in, said gravely, "It's true that you have the Brazos Kid under arrest, Sheriff?"

"Yes, sir. It's true."

"Is it possible for my client to see the man?"

"If she wishes to see him."

Blakely nodded, sighed, looked more

grave. "She wishes it," he said. "She is eager to see him. Would it be agreeable if I brought her here in half an hour?"

Monahan nodded. Blakely thanked him, turned to the door. He paused, seeming lost in thought, then faced the sheriff again. He was about to speak, but glanced uncertainly in my direction.

The sheriff said quickly, "My adopted son, Danny, Mr. Blakely. He helped me take the Kid. You may speak in front of him."

Blakely nodded to me. Then: "Sheriff, is there the slightest chance that this outlaw may be my client's son?"

"He is your client's son."

"He's told you his right name?"

"No. But he has the scar and the birthmark."

Blakely nodded again. "I see, Sheriff," he said flatly. "It's regrettable. I was hoping that it would turn out differently. Mrs. Naylor is quite calm about it, at least on the surface. But I'm afraid of what the shock will do to her. And to her husband, when he learns the truth. Mr. Naylor is ill of a heart ailment, and a shock like this might—"

He sighed heavily. And smiled without amusement. "I wish this were still the day of miracles. I would rather see those two people go without ever finding their son. I won't tell Mrs. Naylor that this outlaw could be her son. Perhaps some miracle will happen—and blind her so that she won't be able to see the identifying marks on him."

He went out, shaking his head.

The sheriff muttered, "A miracle!" He began pacing back and forth. He said that again, not in disgust or with contempt. It was as though he were praying for a miracle. It wasn't much, maybe, all this anxiety about the feelings of a woman who meant nothing at all to the sheriff of Shasta County. But Pat Monahan was a man with a heart. And that Lawyer Blakely too had a heart.

Most of the half hour was gone before Pat Monahan stopped his pacing, and turned to me. "Danny, you'll side me?"

"In anything, Pat. You know that."

He smiled. "Sure," he said. "I know that, Danny."

He went to the closet that he called "the arsenal," and unlocked it. It was filled with six-guns and rifles and shotguns, all neatly racked. It also contained an assortment of handcuffs and leg irons. He took out a set of the shackles, relocked the closet, then said, "Let's go, Danny."

We went upstairs to the cell block, to the cell where the Brazos Kid was stretched out on a hard wooden bunk. The sheriff unlocked the door, and we went in. The Kid sat up, a sneer on his tough face.

"You hear my friends out there, badge toters?" he said mockingly. "They'll have me out of here before sundown. And once I'm out, I'm coming gunning for you two. I'm going to gut-shoot the pair of—" He gave a violent start when Pat Monahan snapped on the bracelets. "What's the idea?" he demanded.

He went into a rage when Monahan didn't answer, and it took the two of us to hold him down and put on the leg irons. He was that violent. He yelled and screamed, until the sheriff gagged him with his own neck scarf.

"Maybe we'd better have some rope, Danny," Pat Monahan said. "I want him so still and quiet that nobody catches on that he's here."

He gave me the key to the arsenal, and I fetched the rope. We tied the Kid to the bunk, so tight that he couldn't move a muscle. His eyes hated us. We left the cell, Pat Monahan locking the door. When we came to the cell nearest the stairs, he stopped and said:

"Not much time, Danny. They'll be here any minute. Give me your deputy's badge. And your gun."

I was beginning to catch on. I unpinned my star, unbuckled my gun rig. He took them, then nodded at the cell. I went in and he closed and locked the iron-barred door.

"It's loco, Danny," he said. "It's no miracle, and maybe we're doing wrong. But—well, I've done crazier things in my time. Can you pull it off, son?"

"I'll sure try," I told him.

WHEN I heard them coming a few minutes later, I had my hat and coat and neck scarf off. I had my shirt collar open, and my yellow hair mussed. My hands were shaking and my mouth was dust-dry. I sat on the bunk, and drooped—trying to look despairing as a man should look when bound for the gallows. I held my head in my hands. I didn't look up even when they reached the cell door and the sheriff unlocked it.

They came into the cell, and the sheriff said, making his voice harsh, "Kid, here's somebody to see you."

I lifted my head, tried to put an ugly look on my face.

She stood leaning on Lawyer Blakely's arm, a small woman dressed in black. She was maybe fifty; or maybe she was younger, and worry made her look that old. She looked like the kind of woman—a fine lady—that a young fellow would want for a mother.

Pat Monahan said curtly, "Stand up, you!"

I snarled, Kid-fashion, and slowly stood. She left the lawyer, who was staring at me in disbelief. She came close to me, a wistful smile on her face.

"Richard—?" she said, whispering it.

I glared at Pat. "Richard?" I growled. "What the hell is this?"

"Your name is not Richard Naylor?" he said. "You're sure of that?"

"Sure, I'm sure. What is this, anyway?"

"Take off your shirt, Kid."

"What!"

"Take off your shirt," Pat Monahan said. "Or I'll do it for you."

He took a threatening step toward me, acting now like folks, especially Eastern folks, think a Western peace officer should act. I shrugged and peeled off my shirt, and I guess I got red in the face showing myself naked like that.

Mrs. Naylor said finally, "No—there's no scar, no birthmark." There was relief in her voice, but maybe a little disappointment too. "No, this is not Richard."

She moved back to the lawyer's side, and I got back into my shirt. She still watched me, her eyes sad. She was relieved that she hadn't found her son in the Brazos Kid, but I knew that if it had worked out differently she would have claimed him as her own—and stood by him to the bitter end. A woman with real mother love is like that. She thought that I was a killer, a man with the blood of a dozen and more men on my hands, but she wasn't afraid of me. She was kind toward me.

"You're so good-looking," she said. "I can't see any bad in you, young man. Is there—" her voice broke a little—

"anything I can do for you?"

I couldn't play-act the Kid part then. I couldn't snarl at her. I just shook my head.

They took her away then, the sheriff locking me in again. As they moved to the stairs to go down and out, Lawyer Blakely said, "Thank you. Thank you very much." He was saying it to Sheriff Pat Monahan, but he meant me to hear, too.

Pat came back in a little while and let me out. "A miracle, Danny?" he said, smiling. "They're leaving town on today's stage. You'll just have to keep out of sight until the stage leaves."

He put his arm about my shoulder as we went to give the Brazos Kid the freedom of his cell. We'd never been closer than at that moment—I and the big-hearted man who once worked a small miracle.

BOWIE'S BUTCHER-KNIFE BATTLE

THE OLD WORLD'S "code of honor," with its many rules and punctilios, had all but died out in Europe when it took root in the United States, following the Civil War. But the hardy Westerners who subscribed to the basic idea of the duel were not men to allow niceties of etiquette to interfere with getting the job done. A case in point is the famous incident at Vidalia Bar, which started out as an affair of honor and ended as a bloody Donnybrook, with James Bowie figuring prominently in the doings.

According to many accounts, the savage fray was witnessed by hundreds of people from the decks of a river steamer, and Bowie wielded his famed knife with devastating effect. In fact, the knife which later bore his name had not yet been designed; Bowie on this day was armed with a huge butcher knife, honed to razor sharpness.

The principals in the duel were two gentlemen, a Dr. Maddox and a General Wells. Each had chosen several seconds. Whether by accident or design, it happened that various pairs of the two groups bore each other grudges of their own, quite apart from the matter immediately at hand.

Things started off in the most approved fashion. Wells and Maddox exchanged shots, drawing no blood. They repeated, with the same lack of result. Whereupon they decided that honor had been satisfied, and shook hands. The seconds, however, had come to see blood taken, and if the principals were satisfied without it, they were not. The two parties advanced upon each other, and in the first exchange of pleasantries, Bowie was shot in the hip. He drew his terrible knife, but before he could use it he was pistol-whipped.

As he was lying on the ground, still another opponent saw him and ran a sword cane into Bowie's chest. Bowie regained consciousness as the man was attempting to withdraw the blade, and with one sweep of the long knife disemboweled his assailant. He rose to his feet just in time to take a pistol shot in his left shoulder. Still fighting, Bowie managed to carve off a large chunk of the pistoleer's arm before the fracas was ended.

—BOB BEAUGRAND

A WESTERN CROSSWORD PUZZLE

By Ruth Nalls

Solution on page 131

ACROSS

1. Western knife
6. Colorado park
11. Poker stake
15. Pipes
16. Iciness
17. "Dumb _____"
18. Mustang
19. Rope halters
21. Betel palms
22. Fish sauces
23. Texas-Louisiana river
24. _____ Hashana (Jewish holiday)
25. Uncloses (poetic)
26. Filaments
27. The southeast wind
29. Jumps nervously, as a horse
30. Shootin'-iron holder
33. Frijoles
34. Insect spray
37. Speechifies
38. In motion
39. Front
40. Goes horseback
41. Liquor (slang)
42. Theater boxes
43. Fortune teller
44. Indited
45. Lasso
46. Old times (poetic)
47. Pasturage
48. Squatters
49. Heron
50. Full of vigor and vitality
51. Buckaroo
54. Male sheep
55. Headland
59. Throbbing

ACROSS

60. A kind of stiff bit
61. Another name for 45 Across
62. Zane Grey's "Shepherd of _____"
64. Texas law officer
65. Gaz_____, or antelope
66. Slipped
67. Anointed
68. Female deer
69. Western show
70. Peeler

DOWN

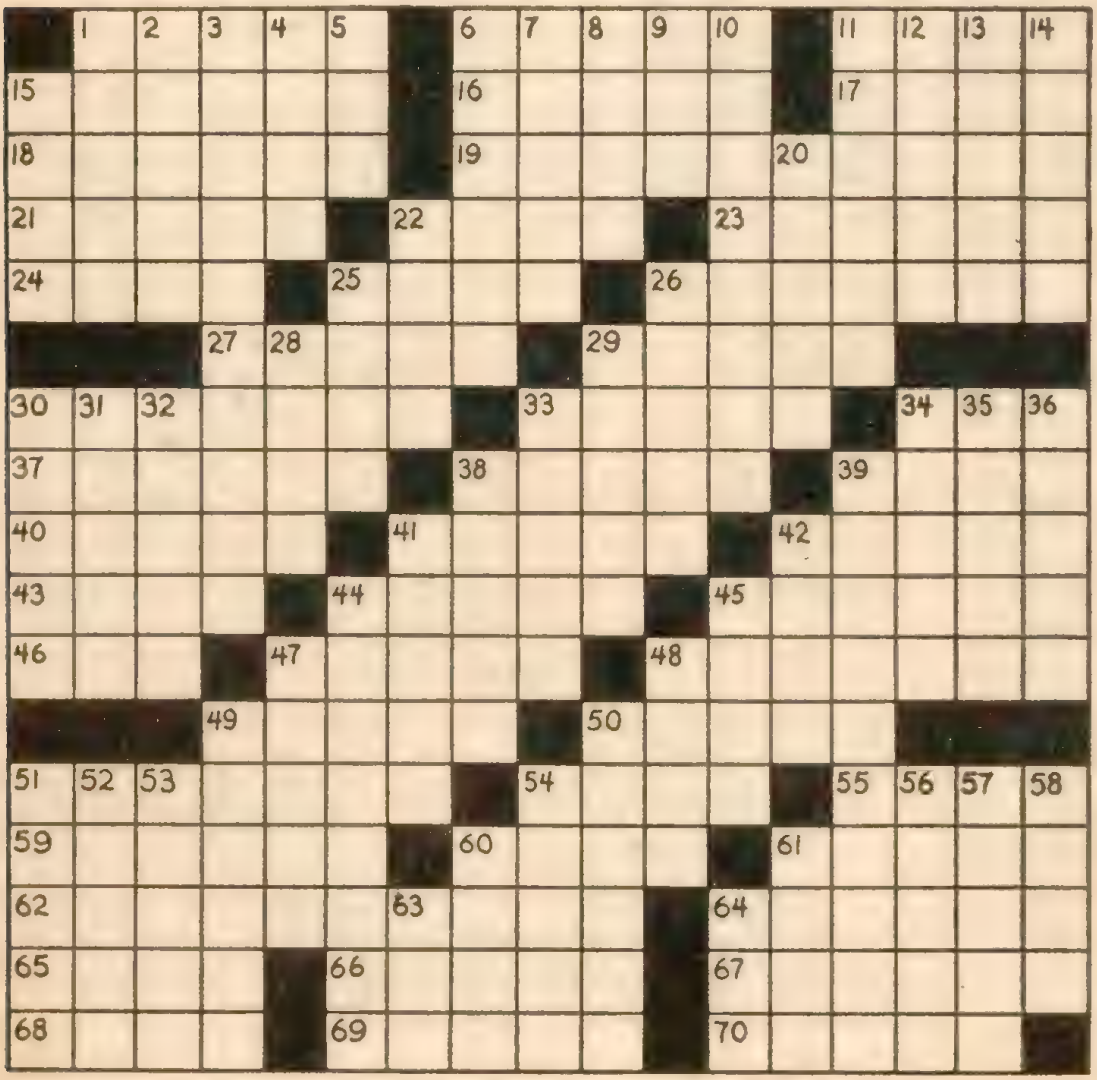
1. Donkey
2. Wind instruments
3. Kind of rifle
4. Peru Indian
5. Self
6. Reverberations
7. Light carriages
8. Nervous twitches
9. Wapiti
10. Cutting wildly
11. Mud bricks
12. Water wheel
13. Tendency
14. Comforts
15. T-shaped piece
20. Female horses
22. Roweled instrument
25. Mineral-bearing materials
26. Scotch landholder
28. Western Indians
29. Take by force
30. Cowboy's best friend
31. Bay window
32. Loaded
33. Western footwear

DOWN

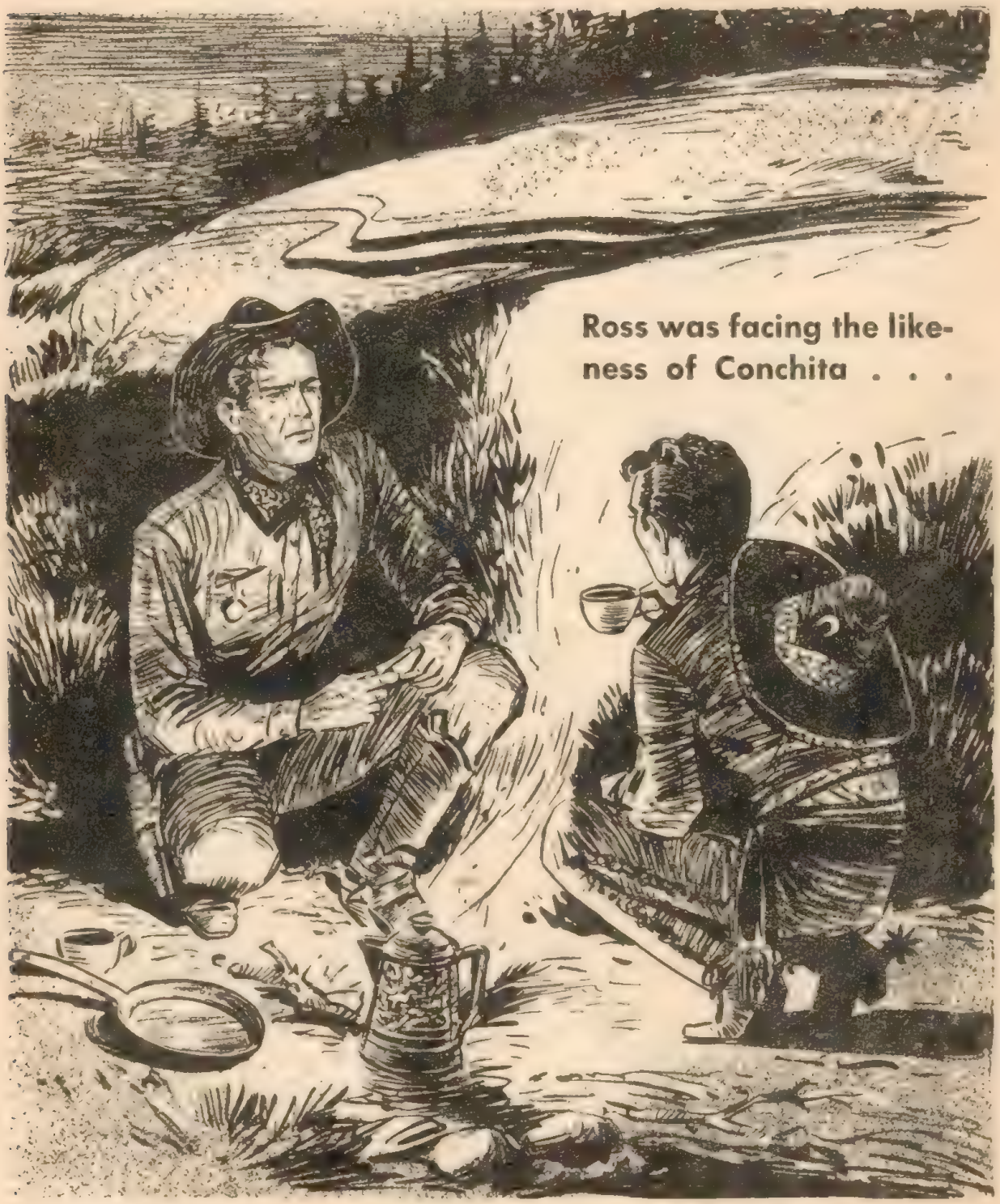
34. Motherless calf
35. Gloomy
36. Trials
38. Silly person
39. Gold-rush participant
41. Rancher's trademark
42. "_____ of the Mohicans"
44. Boss of the remuda
45. Not as much
47. _____da, Spanish province
48. Senseless
49. Scolds

DOWN

50. Texas border city
51. Confined
52. The eye (comb. form)
53. Marine mammal
54. Coin of India
56. National bird
57. Beef critter
58. Carnelian
60. Thick part of milk
61. Frog genus
63. Gold (Span.)
64. Knock



A Ross Ringler Story by George C. Appell



Ringler stumbles onto a corpse, meets a nervous sheriff and an overpublicized bandit—and reads a blurred page from the book of his own past.

The Whispering Hills

ROSS RINGLER was staying east of the weather, riding slowly south with the cold glint of Pike's Peak twenty horse miles at his back. Piled-up cloud masses trailed the last of a line storm across the red west, and dark was the face of the desert. Farther east, to his left, a silver splinter shimmered the length of the land, winking on and off like moonglow on a gigantic bayonet. That would be the new telegraph wire from Culver up to Denver, and Ringler wondered why Pobrecito hadn't cut it. Any renegade in his right head would cut wires as a matter of course, though it was possible that Pobrecito was not in his right head. Poor Little Fool.

And Ringler yanked his sandy face around, from habit. He was cleanly silhouetted out here in the afterwash of the stormy afternoon, and even a Mexican can hit a figure that's exposed like a stump through a bed sheet. Ringler stood six feet, four inches without heels, and he rode at one hundred and eighty pounds. He had been riding for almost thirty years, almost a generation; and that can accumulate things against a man. Gunsights, for one.

He yanked his face around over the shoulder, but there was nothing in that direction but gray sand and the distant flicker of the telegraph, like dropped quicksilver.

Ross Ringler told his roan's twitching ears, "Dammit, if they don't fence you with range wire, they fence you with sparks wire. I'm movin' on, and to hell with this Pobrecito an' rewards, and to hell with Bewford Bee, too—What's wrong with your ears?" Ringler had never met the Culver sheriff, but he didn't like the name. It roused sour memories in him, somehow, and played tag with them.

The storm was muttering south in impotent rage, carried along in its own back-blast, threatening to return and smash humankind from the earth. The roan reared and pulled aside and pranced uncertainly, and Ringler brought it down and shortened rein. From habit he opened his holster and tucked the flap into his cartridge belt, then made a cast.

He was casting with slitted eyes left and right in decreasing parallels when he saw the body. It looked crumpled, from where he sat, and irregular in shape. He had to talk to his roan then, and soothe it and promise it many things such as sugar cakes and scratching-trees and spring water. Then he rode upwind of the body and swung off and pegged the roan.

The man was lying face down on one cheek, spurred heels out, arms splayed wide on each side, dead fingers clawed into the dust. Even as Ringler squatted, a tiny out-gasp from the dying weather caught a rowel and fanned it gently. The thin, metallic whine went east with the breeze, and the desert was silent again.

Ringler seized a boot and lifted it, and both of the man's legs rose from

the dust like green boughs. Ringler lowered the legs and shifted his attention to the shirt, which was torn in two places between the shoulder blades. The blood was crisp and brown-flaky, which with the stiffening muscles added up to incomplete rigor mortis, or death within the day. At sunrise, say, or slightly later.

Ross pried up a shoulder and examined the man's face. He did not recognize the calm, waxen features. He judged the man to have been in his middle fifties, maybe a bit more. His clothing was good, but there were no papers in it. Nothing but shredded sacking in a shirt pocket where one of the bullets had torn through.

The bullets, Ringler concluded, had been the new center-fire models, cased in bottleneck cartridges and hurled from a Winchester .44-40. There was no brass in sight, nor did he expect to find any, but he stuck to his conclusion. He knew bullets like he knew his teeth, and he had carried most of those for forty-odd years.

He stood up, swiveling his head around cautiously. Sometimes a killer will leave his dead man as a decoy, if he's killing for revenge and wants to get the partner too. But there was nothing in the twilight but purple haze bolted across with amber bars.

Ringler's hand found his side pocket and crept inside and felt the three cartwheels at the bottom. It was his total worldly wealth, in addition to his clothes, his hardware, his roan and its furniture.

He said to the body, "Mr. Anybody, I surely hope you had somethin' worth killin' you for. I'd surely hate to get pecked in the back for three dollars. An' I wish I had a shovel to plant you with, but I don't dig graves."

He grinned, and the tight skin of his long jaws leaped into terraced wrinkles. He had acquired the relaxful habit of talking aloud when alone, after the manner of drifters, though when in the presence of the living he seldom spoke at all.

"So long, ol' Anybody, an' I'll tell Mr. Bee all about it."

He rode on, pointing slightly east now, in the general direction of Culver. It was safer riding at night, because the whole world was your getaway trail if you needed it. And it was better, riding at night, because the true partnership of man and horse took form and became action: the man sitting loosely, listening to the rhythm of hoof falls and the gentle scrunch of harness, which could tell him better than his eyes whether or not the leather was comfortable on the horse; and the horse picking its way surely through the darkness, feeling from withers to fetlocks the responsibility of carrying its rider.

Presently stars were up there; and shortly they became a bright net stretched from Mexico north and on out of sight. Only the west remained obscured by cloud scud, as if under punishment for having spawned that line storm. It was gone completely now, and only its misty tatters remained.

Ringler wondered what this Pobrecito looked like. Probably like any other Mex bandit, he decided. Small and swart and fast and savage—and a bad shot. Fastidious with his clothing and hair—and aloof to the health of his horse. Pobrecito was rumored to be operating out of *Las Monteras Murmullondo*—The Whispering Hills—which lay scattered across the desert west of Culver. It seemed unlikely to Ringler

that he could have struck this far north of the Hills, two days' ride north, for Mexes liked short routes of withdrawal. Yet, back there in the darkness was the body of a man whose life had been punched out with a brace of .44-40s, and this new renegade was partial to the center-fire cartridge. So Ringler would present himself to the sheriff whose name he didn't like, and report the location of Mr. Anybody.

He made a dry camp and handled his roan and rigged a hobble and started coffee, old grounds in cold water. He sucked absently on a brown-paper cigarette, watching the tip burn brightly as he inhaled, thinking of this and that, trying not to think too far back down the years, for distant memories hurt. Close ones can be battled and subdued, but not the distant ones. If they've stayed with you that long, then they must be valid. Like the time Ringler had first crossed into Mexico twenty and more years ago.

There had been a herd ahead of him, he was driving it in a hurry, and the rightful brand owners were not far behind him. But he had made it, received his gold, and trailed on into Sonora, where he'd met the one called Conchita. Conchita, whose bronze breasts had the resiliency and texture of a mountain lioness's underbelly. Conchita, tall for her kind and slimmer than most, stroking Ross's bare ribs with the daggered nails of a purring cat.

He had heard later—like you hear anything on the desert grapevine—that she had had a kid, and that her uncles were raising him. But even if Ringler had been the reason, what could a drifter do for the boy?

The cigarette burned his fingers and he crushed it out. His roan was cropping dew grass yonder, big in the starlight. All the cloud scud was gone and the western skies were brilliant with stars triumphant. A little breeze tumbled across the grass tops, and Ringler wondered if Mr. Anybody's rowels were spinning. He sipped cold coffee from the dented can that was his silverware, and swallowed gratefully. He wondered what Bewford Bee would be like, and couldn't for the life of him imagine the man. Man with a name like that, he ought to be on the stage.

Ross finished the rancid coffee and fashioned up another smoke and lay with his head on his saddle, boots crossed, hands behind his neck, staring at the stars. He felt pretty good. He had three dollars, a gun and a horse, and not everybody could boast of those things. He had some makings, he had some news, and he knew where he was going tomorrow. Not many men could console themselves with those advantages, however temporary.

He bethought himself that after he had delivered his information and left Culver, he'd cast down through the Spanish Peaks and maybe find Henry P. Wolf and go on a hunt. Henry—the P stood for Prairie—was an Osage who had become tired of rotten Agency beef and taken to the hills and to hell with the Indian Bureau's brand of gratitude. Henry, before he jumped, had stretched a coyote's fresh pelt over the brass key of the automatic alarm in the Agent's office, and by the time Henry was free and away, the drying pelt had contracted sufficiently to set off the alarm and, ultimately, cause a ruckus all the way back to Washington City. Ringler always laughed at that when he was alone and tired and hungry, when people would be riding him down, suspicious of his loneness,

and he couldn't get work and the horizons would seem to roll down on him like accusing specters.

He tamped out his smoke and rolled over in his frayed blanket and shut his eyes. Once during the night—or was it in his dreams?—he heard Conchita's husky voice calling to him, begging him to come back. Or was it the returning memory of something he had heard years ago: *That girl in Sonora, Ringler, she stabbed the man who tried to mishandle her, and you better go. She died later. The man's name was*— Ringler had heard it once, along the grapevine, and now it was forgotten.

BEWFORD BEE was nervously probing at his gold molar caps with a slim silver toothpick, staring through the clean window of his scrubbed office at the morning traffic of Culver outside. Bewford Bee was always in motion, one way or another. If he wasn't playing with the waxed tips of his crisp black mustaches, he was rubbing his powdered jowls; and if he wasn't doing that, he was flicking dust from his soft boots with a gray glove or picking lint from the blaze of his brocaded weskit. And if he wasn't doing those things, he was picking his nose or his teeth.

It was spoken through Culver that he went through all these motions to conceal the fact that he was unable to stand straight, and consequently had become bow-shouldered. Had he been able to stand straight, he would have measured close to six feet; but as it was, he appeared to be only middle-sized. During his annual addresses to the meeting of the Ladies' Basket Picnic Society on the subject of Our Civic Future, he would lean over a table and strike it frequently, as if vehement about his words. And his words, like his motions, came jerkily.

He was inspecting the tip of the silver toothpick when he saw a tall man with sandy skin ride in from the north, and for some unaccountable reason he sensed a throb of fear. He was unable to identify it; it pulsed through him and went away, but it had happened.

Ross Ringler stamped in without knocking. He knew that if you knock on a sheriff's door, or otherwise hesitate, it implies that you have a record.

"Sheriff?"

Bewford Bee nodded, sensing the fear again. He drew out his leather case, selected a cheroot, nipped off its end, and lighted it. The breath of tobacco leaf, laced with the sulphurous burst of the match, swept upward.

"What can we do for you?" Bee always employed the collective pronoun when mentioning his work. It accented his connection with Culver, he said, and underlined the importance of community co-operation. He rubbed his powdered jowls, snapped lint from his weskit, and waited nervously.

Ringler said, "I just come down from Denver-way. Are you Bee?"

"That is my name, Bewford Bee."

Ringler hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "Man's on the desert, quarter march from here. Been dead since—" Ross screwed up his eyes, thinking back—"a full day ago. Since yestiddy."

Bewford Bee's plump hand darted to the desk, snagged pen and paper, stabbed pen to ink well, poised pen over paper. "Yes?" The cheroot was tasting sour and his palms were dry and his breakfast was turning over. Bee was not a coward, but neither was he a hero, and corpses were distasteful to him. That's why he kept the services

of a full-time deputy, who spent most of his time in field work. He eyed the wall clock, and wondered where the deputy was. "Yes?"

"Had no papers on him. Man 'bout fifty-sixty, guess." Ringler paused, regarding the sheriff curiously.

"North of here?" Bee's pen jerked erratically, and scrawls appeared on the paper.

"Like I just said." Ringler fished for makings, and presently was refreshing himself with a cigarette. "Shot twice."

"Twice?" The pen left the paper.

"In the back—with a .44-40." Ringler leaned cross-legged against the door jamb, smoking without taking the cigarette from his lips. "A long-range weapon."

Something was wrong, and he didn't know what it was. He had had the sensation before, and always just in time: when he'd been lifting a drink in Carson City and saw Orville Breed come in, reflected in the bar mirror. Two shots, a frosted hole in the mirror, and Breed dead in the doorway. Or when he was night-herding for the Y Valley Y and the McKinney Boys threw the rustle right down on top of him and he'd scrambled up the only tree on bed ground and saved his skin by a whisker. What was important was that he'd been told that evening by the *segundo* to chop down that tree for firewood, and he'd refused. He'd mumbled something about it making a fit scratching-post for his horse.

And now this. "In the back," he repeated. "Twice."

Bewford Bee's eyes wandered to the wall clock again. "No papers."

"No papers."

Bee shook drops from the pen. "Why didn't you pack him in?"

"I never touch other people's murder, Mr. Bee."

Bee leaned on his elbows, washing his moist palms together. "Ever hear of Pobrecito?"

"Yes, I guess everybody has, though where he got that name, I don't know. He works out of the Hills, I hear."

"You're familiar with the Hills?" Bee put the pen down. "This might have been him. Renegade. Nothing safe." Bee fixed luminous eyes on Ringler. "I know something of Mexkin bandits." His eyes became greedy. "Chased a few myself when I was younger, and they're all alike. I named this mystery Mex Pobrecito, because that's how he's behaving."

"This wasn't Pobrecito lyin' out on the desert, if that's what you're thinking." Ringler spat out his cigarette and stepped on it. "Pobrecito's not yet middle-aged, from the way folks describe the way he rides, an' this man up the desert was over fifty."

Bee nodded, not taking his eyes from Ringler's face. "What's your name? How do I know you didn't kill him?" The sheriff had urgent need for his deputy, the man had gone to breakfast a half hour ago.

"My name's"—he never knew later why he said it, any more than why he hadn't chopped down that tree—"Henry Wolf."

Bee wrote it down. "You employed, Wolf?"

"When I can get it."

Bee wrote that down, too. "Have you ever seen Pobrecito?" He was reported as being tall and fast-riding, on a lanky horse. He had never been seen in full daylight.

"No, I haven't."

Bee blotted the paper. "Mind turning out for me? Strictly routine, no offense. Duty."

Ross turned out his pockets, showed the inside of his hat, and remarked that he had no saddlebags.

Bee nodded abruptly. "Drifter, eh?"

"Sort of."

The sheriff took his elbows from the desk and tried to lean back and couldn't. He sat hunched over his knees. "Like mercury through your fingers, this bandit." Across the street at the telegraph office, a chunky man thrust himself into the open, glanced left and right for traffic, and jogged toward Bee's office. Bee was saying, "He struck the Sundown outfit on the twenty-ninth of last month—out by the Hills—and got the pay roll. Now he's done this."

"You sure it was him?"

Bee's hands flew out. "Who else? I wasn't here yesterday, might have done some good if I had been. Never can tell." And Bewford Bee shook his jowls and frowned.

The chunky man swung through the door and marched to the desk. "Wire from Denver. They want to know where's Allison?"

"Allison?" Bee unfolded the yellow foolscap. "Had your breakfast?"

"Yeah." The deputy was breathing hard. "This held me up."

Bee was reading the wire. "Says when did he leave Culver, he hasn't arrived in Denver yet, and should have been there for supper yesterday." Bee and his deputy stared at each other a moment, and Bee balled the paper up and tossed it into a waste basket.

The deputy bent low. "Who's him?"

"Name of Wolf. Found a body, better go see." The sheriff suddenly discovered that his cheroot had gone out, and he relighted it carefully, sucking and puffing until the tip was orange. He blew out the match. "Wolf? You know the Hills—want to help?"

"Help how?"

"Temporary deputy. Two dollars a day, chuck." Bee raised a brow at his cheroot. "Man Allison, leading citizen, secretary of the Range Association. Always carried his own money to Denver for deposit there. Isn't there now, left here two days ago."

Ringler came away from the door jamb. "I barely might be interested. Seems your Allison must be that man on the desert."

The chunky deputy asked, "Fifty-ish, gray-headed, well-dressed?"

"That's the one."

The deputy was surly. "Maybe if the sheriff was around more, things like this wouldn't happen. Maybe if he'd been around on the twenty-ninth of last month, the Sundown job wouldn't have been worked."

Bee faced away from him. "You know the Hills well?" He narrowed his eyes at Ross.

"I used to." The warning sensation was in him again, nudging his nervenet. "Want me to look there?"

"Yes." Bee opened a drawer and found a dented badge and flipped it through the air. "Right away."

Ringler caught the badge and stuffed it into a shirt pocket. "Your dead man's a quarter march north, like I said. He's lyin' four-five miles west of the telegraph."

Bewford Bee took his hat, strapped on his gun, and thrust himself at the door.

"I'll stop at my room for my cantle roll, because I'll ride south and feel around that way. Wolf, you take the Hills to westward." He said to his deputy, "And you go out and pack that body in." He stepped aside to let the man pass. "Twice between the shoul-

ders, eh?" He sucked the fringe of his mustache. "That's good shooting." Then he was gone.

Ringler took his time leaving Culver. He bought some airtights and charged them to the county on the strength of his badge, got feed for his roan—the Hills were notoriously bare of good forage—and then trotted west and gained the desert. Far up to his right, north, he saw the deputy galloping to beat the sun's coming heat. He'd find Allison, right enough, unless the coyotes had found him first. And Ringler—Deputy Wolf—would find Pobrecito and kill him where he found him, because the warrant for the man stipulated a reward of five thousand dollars dead or alive, and it is much easier to transport a dead prisoner than a kicking one. Ringler opened his holster flap, tucked it behind his cartridge belt, and pointed directly west for the Whispering Hills. He glanced north again, but the deputy was out of sight. Bee had not yet appeared to southward.

The new deputy figured that he would enter the first passes of the Hills about midafternoon.

THE lanky young man who filled Pobrecito's description lay in the warm rocks of the passes watching the tall rider on the roan plod toward him.

The man in the rocks had a Winchester .44 against his cheek, and he was enjoying this game of tracing the approaching rider through the front sight blade. It would be easy, even from this distance, to take a breath, hold it; squeeze the trigger and follow through. The tall rider would spin from the roan with a shattered face, the roan would break free, and the killer could later catch up the roan. His own horse, a patch-colored castoff from a Mexican remount remuda, might go lame at any minute. That roan would come in handy.

The sun's flaming plate was well west of noon, behind the back of the man in the rocks—he was called by his family Manuel—and the harsh yellow light delineated in sharp detail the features of the tall rider. Manuel, after a moment of anticipatory glee, threw on the safety catch, crabbed backward out of the rocks, and mounted his patch. He trotted south in a wide circle that eventually swung him back east out of the passes and brought him in behind the roan. Toward twilight, he picked up the roan's trail and followed it slowly into the Hills, the pursued now having become the pursuer. Manuel always liked to divine a man's intentions before calling him down.

Twilight's saffron veil was draping the west when he rode past some cottonwoods bearding the rim of a flat-rock shelf above him. That was when he heard the command: "*Paré!*"

He whipped up the Winchester and a shot smashed the stock and knocked the gun to the ground. Manuel raised hands that were shaking in anger, biting his lower lip. Smoke fluffed from the cottonwoods and vanished.

"*Ven aca.*" Ross Ringler, stepping from the bush, was suppressing his amusement and relief. If this was Pobrecito, the man didn't stack up to five thousand dollars' worth. He was poorly dressed, the fringing of his battered sombrero was torn, and he had no spurs. In Ringler's opinion, he had come a long way. Even the smashed Winchester looked unoiled.

Ringler said, "Who're you, *chico?*"

"My name is Manuel," he said sullenly. "I saved your life back there."

"So? I just saved yours." Ringler let his hammer forward and holstered. "You haven't been in this business long, amigo." He was feeling an affinity for this youngster, and it was more than the affinity one wanderer feels for another. Ringler couldn't define it, but he knew it was there. "Take care, next time."

"What business?" Defiance was in the question.

"Ambushin' people—then lettin' yourself be taken like I took you. I cut your trail." Ringler swung down and dragged his roan off the flatrock. "Go pick up your rifle." He was trying not to grin, because Mexicans are a proud people and this Mexican would have an overdose of that quality, from the carry of his height and the lift of his chin. "Why'd you save my life?"

"Because you are not the man I wait for. I wait for a man I hear hangs his hat in Culver—and you do not resemble him."

Ross was interested. "Who d'you wait for?"

"Berry. You know him?" Manuel had the Winchester slung cross-arm and his dancing eyes were kindling with eagerness.

"No, I don't." Ringler got a pit fire started and put a spider over the coals and made coffee. "Any man saves m' life can drink m' brew. Move in."

Manuel squatted and accepted some of the black brew. "And perhaps your name is?" He was becoming more tractable now. A man will react that way, if you place overt trust in him.

"Wolf. Henry Wolf."

"*Lobo*, so." Manuel sipped coffee, eyeing the dusk with suspicion. "To my inferiors, I am Señor Rosa."

Ringler approved of that attitude; and in approving it, he felt it come home. And it struck him in the heart that he was staring twenty years into the past.

In the low flame-lick from the pit, he was facing the likeness of Conchita—a likeness leavened by youth and maleness, but with the same quick eyes and a certain salty arrogance. It was that same Conchita who later had stabbed a man for trying to mistreat her; and Ringler, in the firelight, shuddered in his damp shirt and breathed, *My God.*

"Señor Lobo—you are sick?"

"No—no." Ross fashioned a brown-paper and lit it, hands trembling. He often had wondered what it would be like if he should be confronted with a child of Conchita, and here it was and he didn't know whether to feel guilty or not.

"Señor—you have killed a man?" Urgency was in Manuel Rosa's tone—urgency, and overnote of suspicion.

"Manuel, why do you want to kill this—Berry?" Ringler flipped the half-smoked cigarette into the pit. "He hurt you?" And Ross Ringler suspected the answer before it came.

"No, señor. My mother."

The words echoed away hollowly and there was no sound save the smuttering of pit coals. Then Ringler stood up. There is one thing a drifter can do for this boy, he told himself.

"You stay here—up on that rock, behind the bush. Principle of the art of ambush, as learned from an Osage."

"Wait!" Manuel was on his feet, Winchester leveled. "Perhaps you are a deputy—"

"Put down that gun, son." Ross took his roan and swung up. "Do as I tell you!" And then he pushed east toward Culver, not once looking back. He rode all night, plagued with horrible

thoughts, unmindful of the normal relationship between man and horse, giving the roan full head and both bits.

THERE was a crowd in front of Bee's office, though the hour was before breakfast and most people in Culver had not yet taken to the street. Two horses were at the tie-rail and each carried the slung limpness of a body. The chunky deputy was one, and the other was the man Allison. Ringler examined at leisurely length the wounds under the ripped shirts, and arrived at some conclusions before going inside.

Bewford Bee was nervously picking his teeth. "It was awful, Wolf, simply awful. I felt around to southward and there was nothing there, so I came back to Culver. Nothing here either. Then I went north, and within eight-ten miles stumbled across my deputy, dead, and Allison, dead. So I brought 'em in. Just got here."

Bee wiped his forehead with a slippery palm. "Looked all over hell for who did it." The sheriff's luminous eye narrowed. "It was this Pobrecito, I tell you." He fumbled for a cheroot, found a match. "See any sign in the Hills?"

"Yes."

The match wavered, sputtered, went out. "Pobrecito?" Disbelief made Bee's voice a bleat.

"Yes."

Bee swiped another match alight and touched it to the cheroot. He was perspiring. "That's impossible. He's north of here."

"He's in the Whispering Hills."

Bewford Bee flung the smoking match aside and drew brightly on his cheroot. "Well, go out and bring him in!" He inhaled and exhaled. "Got him tied up? I've got to be in Denver—"

"We'll both bring him in."

The wall clock ticked the seconds away, chopping away the minutes. "Look, Wolf. I'd take my pay and ride on, if I were you."

"You're not me." Ringler stepped to the desk. "Get smart, Bee. Wouldn't you like half of five thousand dollars?"

Bewford Bee's cheroot went out. He sucked dryly a moment, and relaxed. His eyes met Ringler's, and he started to nod. "Of course, if you've made identification—"

"He answers the description. Young Mex, renegade. Has a Winchester .44."

Bee smiled calmly. "You saw him?"

Ringler stepped back from the desk. "I had supper with him."

The sheriff had trouble making words; his voice was mucous-husky. "You know where he is—this man? He doesn't suspect anything?"

"Exactly where he is. He thinks I want to kill you, so he trusted me to come in."

Bee chuckled hoarsely. Silent argument twitched his mouth and made his mustaches wriggle. Then he stood up. "You lead, Wolf."

"We'll ride together."

It was the longest ride of Ross Ringler's life. Twice he made the wrong turn in order to time their arrival in the Hills for near-twilight; and it was late afternoon by the time they entered the passes. Bewford Bee hung back a pace and started to claw at his cantle roll. His smile was sick.

"I don't trust a hand gun, Wolf, when I have something better." He was opening the roll.

Ringler was noticing that the man sat his saddle high, despite the affliction that kept him half-crouched at the walk. A perfect target, that silhouette. Ringler glanced up at the bush-bearded

flatrock—and a name exploded in his head with the force of canister shot. He had to swallow several times before he could speak, for this name had been long-forgotten.

"Berriman?" Ross was wire-tense. "Ever know a girl down Sonora-way called Conchita?"—*Ben Berriman!*—

The color washed from the sheriff's face and the powder on his jowls resembled smudged plaster. His hand flicked to his holster and Ringler snagged out his hand gun and there was a screech from the rocks above.

Manuel was dropping through the green air, arms outspread like thin wings. Ross yelled: "Here's your fall man—fallin' onto you!" Manuel plummeted boots-first into the man called Bewford Bee and belted him off his saddle and thumped him onto the ground. The horse crow-hopped and flung itself sideways. There was a red moment of thrashing fury, of arms and legs windmilling and the slock of steel on flesh. A blade flashed brightly and Bee grunted, then screamed, then kicked his boots in futile protest as the blade gnawed deeper under his breastbone and carved away the processes of life.

Manuel wiped the steel clean and returned the knife to his shirt. He winked up at Ringler. "Señor Lobo, I just finished what my mother began. Look!" And he swiftly tugged open Bee's weskit and pointed to a sickle-shaped scar that curved across that dead stomach.

"My uncles say to look for a man who cannot hold his body straight because of the knife cut across the belly that never heal right. The name is sounding like Berry." Manuel rose and spat into Ben Berriman's blue face. "She do that when he tried to make with her once when he was in Sonora—he say chasing bandits. He hit her so hard she die soon after."

Manuel grinned. "Now I return and marry my girl and light a candle to La Conchita— Excuse me, you do not know what I talk about."

Ringler got his breath back. "That's what I figured you'd do, son." He ripped open the sheriff's cantle roll and dragged out the disassembled Winchester. "This is a .44-40, center-fire."

Manuel held up his broken rifle. "And this is a rim-fire, Winchester .44." He was defiant again, and Ringler wagged a hand at him.

"You're just like me. Relax." He hefted the .44-40. "This is the gun that got Allison, and it's the gun that got the deputy at close range. An' I'll bet three dollars it's the gun that got the Sundown pay roll. Man uses a gun like this, he knows where the bullets go—such as right between the shoulder blades, when no one ever told him that."

"Señor, I do not understand those things." Manuel Rosa stroked his split gunstock ruefully.

"You ever hear of Pobrecito?"

Manuel swung fast about. "Who is a poor little fool? If you insult me, señor, I—"

"Easy-easy! Do as I say— It's just this—son—don't ever get too greedy an' want all the loose money on the range, an' don't forget to cut your wires behind you. Like I'll tell the new sheriff, whoever he may be: when a killer gets suspicious, he clears the air. First by sendin' me to the empty damn Hills, then by racin' up from the south an' removin' a deputy who was questionin' certain absences, an' lastly by removin' himself to Denver an' a railroad train east—almost."

Ross went on, though Manuel was shaking his head vacuously: "An' never talk too much, son—except to yourself an' your horse— Let's pack this back to Culver. That reward'll pay for your honeymoon. I got all the dollars a man like me needs—" Ringler was running out, there was nothing more to say, he was twenty years too late anyway. "Here, take the .44-40 in exchange for that busted .44."

Manuel accepted it gravely. "My mother, she once ask for 'Ross,' before she die." He licked his thin lips. "But, Señor Wolf—this Ross never come."

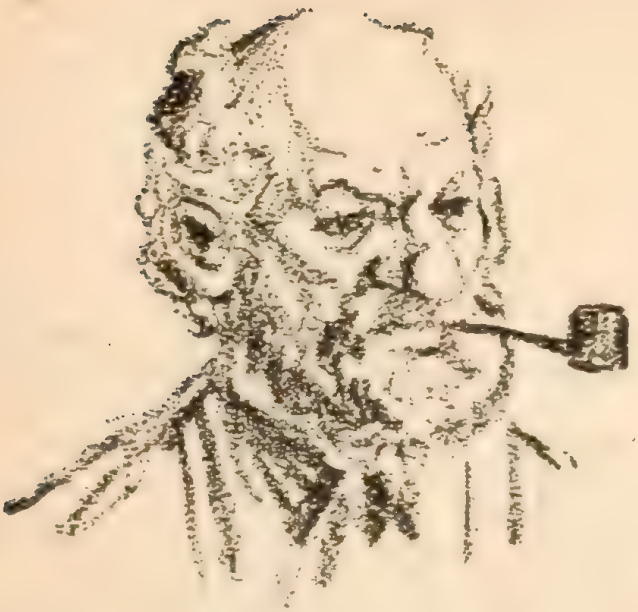
IT WAS next morning before Ringler could leave Culver and push southwest for the Spanish Peaks and maybe find Henry P. Wolf and go on a hunt. He'd be a Mexican's grandfather if he'd stay in Culver and wear the sheriff's badge like the Range Association had wanted—though, come to think of it, he might be a Mexican's grandfather yet.

He left the Whispering Hills and was pressing across the gray desert when the storm struck. Rain plucked at the sand and turned it into mud, but still he didn't care. At a bubbling run that had been dry dust an hour before, he drew out the deputy's badge and pitched it into the current.

The rain spatted into his face and tasted strangely salty on his thin lips, and he wondered what made his eyes work that way. Presently he began to whistle against the muffled cannonading of thunder in the west, for he had three dollars, a gun, a horse, and he knew where he was going.

Solution to "A Western Crossword Puzzle" on page 118

■	B	O	W	I	E	■	E	S	T	E	S	■	A	N	T	E
T	U	B	I	N	G	■	C	H	I	L	L	■	D	O	R	A
B	R	O	N	C	O	■	H	A	C	K	A	M	O	R	E	S
A	R	E	C	A	■	S	O	Y	S	■	S	A	B	I	N	E
R	O	S	H	■	O	P	E	S	■	T	H	R	E	A	D	S
■	■	■	E	U	R	U	S	■	S	H	I	E	S	■	■	■
H	O	L	S	T	E	R	■	B	E	A	N	S	■	D	D	T
O	R	A	T	E	S	■	G	O	I	N	G	■	F	O	R	E
R	I	D	E	S	■	B	O	O	Z	E	■	L	O	G	E	S
S	E	E	R	■	W	R	O	T	E	■	L	A	R	I	A	T
E	L	D	■	G	R	A	S	S	■	N	E	S	T	E	R	S
■	■	■	C	R	A	N	E	■	L	U	S	T	Y	■	■	■
C	O	W	H	A	N	D	■	R	A	M	S	■	N	E	S	S
A	C	H	I	N	G	■	C	U	R	B	■	R	I	A	T	A
G	U	A	D	A	L	O	U	P	E	■	R	A	N	G	E	R
E	L	L	E	■	E	R	R	E	D	■	A	N	E	L	E	D
D	O	E	S	■	R	O	D	E	O	■	P	A	R	E	R	■



Buckshot Means Buryin'!

By

FREMONT SELLERSBEE

A ZGWM Original Fact Feature

THE frenzied fortune seekers who stormed eastward from California across the high Sierra to loot the Comstock Lode found that Hell was only one spade deep in Washoe. They burned in summer heat and froze in the thin air of early winters; supplies were harder to come by than the Comstock silver and "firewood"—mostly sagebrush roots that scorched before they cooked—sold for sixty dollars a cord when you could get it. The desert winds that swirled around Sun Peak were nicknamed "Washoe zephyrs" and were known to blow a laden pack mule off the trail when they were up to strength. The natural hazards and discomforts of this environment were aggravated by men who had found it healthy, or convenient, to leave California, and among these gentry was Sam Brown.

Sam hit the Comstock early in the piece, just after the first great rush to Washoe in 1859, and he came equipped for the business at hand—a pistol on each hip, a bowie knife in his boot top, and an unsavory reputation which was more than justified. As Sam said himself, he had "filled a graveyard singlehanded," and he lost no time in keeping his reputation untarnished while he shunned hard labor of any kind.

His physical assets are described best by saying that Sam could take off his shirt without unbuttoning the collar, and everything else about him was built to the same scale as his chest. Because of his natural assets, Sam preferred close quarters and his "Arkansas toothpick" as a means of livelihood but he could, and did, use his pistols when the occasion demanded. He was for hire in such matters as claim-jumping, political arguments, intimidation of witnesses, and simple theft. When employment lagged, Sam became self-employed without changing his methods or re-tooling, and the fact that his life was complicated, if not made overly hazardous, by homicide bothered him not at all. The sixteen notches on

his side arms, all of them valid credits, did not disturb his sleep.

The available evidence indicates that Sam Brown was a bully for sure with a strong leaning towards "sure-thing" methods in his operations. This was morally reprehensible but most effective, and within a short time after his arrival on the Comstock he was known far and wide and unfavorably as "Bowie Knife" Brown, or "Fighting Sam" Brown, thus distinguishing him from the plain Sam Browns who worked for a living. He was bad coffee when sober. Drunk, he was worse, much worse, and he was his own best press agent. It paid to advertise, if you could deliver the goods—and Sam Brown did both.

Sam went his merry, murderous way unchecked for almost two years. He might have gone on and on and on to gain a niche as one of the West's truly *malos hombres* if he had not become the victim of human nature—his own.

His downfall got started with William Morris Stewart, six foot three of red-bearded lawyer with a mild blue eye, who bestrode the legal aspects of the Comstock "like the Colossus of Rhodes" and had as much brass in his belly as any statue. Their meeting came about in the town of Genoa over a slight case of claim-jumping where Stewart represented the jumped and Sam Brown was a witness—spelled b-u-l-l-y—for the jumper. Both men knew one another by reputation, which has a bearing on what happened when they met.

The case in question was being arbitrated in the rear of Genoa's best saloon, that being the most comfortable public building available, and Sam Brown repaired to the scene looking for Bill Stewart with blood in his eye and a stomach full of the local popskull. Stewart, expecting a visitation, since Sam was never a silent man about his intentions, had safeguarded his legal position and his client's rights by coming to court with a derringer in each coat pocket. Sam came through the doors and stormed down the room, garnished with hardware after his custom, and Stewart calmly slid his hands into his coat pockets and cocked the derringer in each one. The noise was as impressive as a quotation from Blackstone.

Sam blustered a little, Sam swore a little, Sam tried other means of whipping himself up to the job at hand—but the bulge in Stewart's coat pockets was all too plainly seen. And Stewart, secure in his own personal courage and his derringers, kept right on discussing the case at hand as though "Fighting Sam" Brown did not exist. The badman was between a rock and a hard place.

Sam had made his brags and he *wanted* to carry them out; but he did not want to *be* carried out—feet first—which was what he could see in Bill Stewart's pockets if he made his play. Worst of all, there were witnesses to Sam's discomfiture. He finally made the best of a bad matter by confronting Stewart and shaking hands with him as though he had never had another intention in the world. Stewart shook, but his left hand still bulged around the derringer on that side of his coat. The two men parted without serious damage to anything but Sam Brown's reputation.

Sam knew that this damage had been done. He knew, too, that unless this damage was speedily repaired, he was a has-been badman and that he could

not face. He primed himself with more "rifle" whisky and left Genoa after promising to "get somebody afore night." Somebody besides Bill Stewart, that is.

As he rode across Carson Valley on his way back to the Comstock, Sam passed the ranch of Henry Van Sickle. Van was a peace-loving Dutchman with a passion for minding his own business, which was raising hay, grain, and produce for the mines and freight outfits. He had good land, he worked it well, and he cared not for mining or other more lurid forms of endeavor. He was out in the field with a team when Sam Brown rode by and to Sam's wounded pride, he made a wonderful ego-restorer.

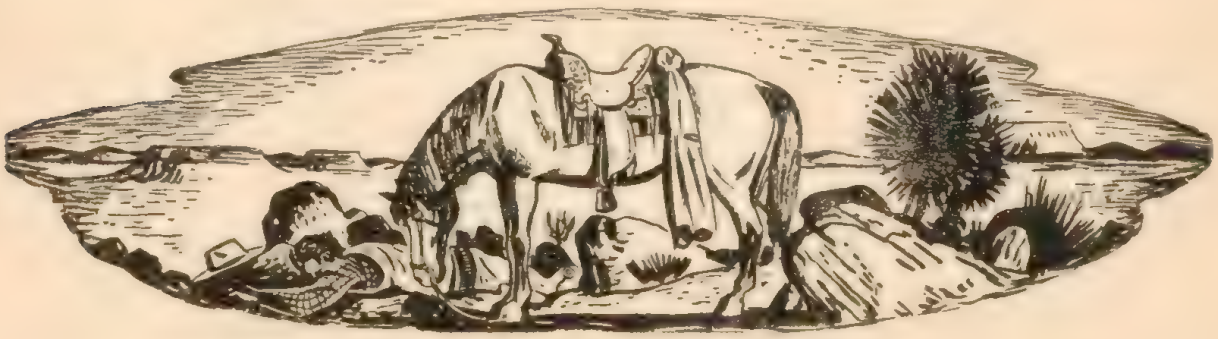
However, the range was a little long for pistols, Sam's eye was not up to par, and Sam's continuity of purpose was impaired by whisky. All the shooting damaged nothing but Van Sickle's feelings. This hurt was permanent. Henry Van Sickle did not like being shot at by passing strangers, even those with reputations as terrible as Sam Brown's. He did not like dodging bullets and hiding like a fugitive on his own land. Henry Van Sickle watched Sam Brown ride on down the road and his jaw settled into a stubborn line.

Saddling one of his team and arming himself with the shotgun he used on hawks and other nuisances, Van Sickle started after Sam Brown. Along with his determination, he exercised good common sense. He did not try to "go after" Sam but fetched a wide circle, aided by the natural terrain, and where a clump of willows masked a turn in the road, he waited for Sam Brown to come to him. He was also prudent enough to make sure that the range was just right for "blue whistlers" when he called the Washoe bully to his reckoning.

Some say that Sam Brown turned craven and begged Van Sickle for his life in abject terror. Others say that in this final moment Sam Brown went for his guns like a man and went out in a blaze of smoke.

Van Sickle never did say much about anything and less than that about Sam Brown.

Whatever Sam did seems unimportant alongside the verdict rendered by a citizen's jury of Carson Valley considering the demise of "Fighting Sam" Brown—"he come to his end from a just dispensation of an all-wise Providence." Which is another way of saying that buckshot means buryin', or it doesn't pay to rub a Dutchman the wrong way.



In Wikiup, a dollar is only a dollar . . .

NO SALE

A Short-Short by Alec Campbell

WIKIUP was a dot at the end of a discouraged road, two wagon greasings south of Hackberry, the county seat. Hemmed between the Hualapai Range and the shimmering bulk of the 'Quarius Cliffs, Wikiup nestled on a mesquite flat beside the Sandy—one square adobe building with a brush *ramada* across its front in lieu of porch and a tar-paint sign slowly fading into the sun-baked bricks:

U. S. Postoffice
Wikiup, A.T.
Branham Hurd, Prop.
Gen Mdse
Meats and Tobacco
Smoked and Unsmoked.

Two saddled horses drowsed against the hitch rail in hip-shot company. In the illusory shade of a big mesquite that let sunlight down like water from a sieve, six other horses busied themselves at the tail gate of a broad-tired, high-sided wagon. Moving with infinite patience, a towhead with a catch rope braided from cotton twine tried to forefoot a bored goat.

The boy's father stood in the doorway of Wikiup, his arms braced against the wide framing for coolness, keeping company with his customers —Old Man Stradley, who ran EC-Connected on more cows than the tax assessor knew about; Harry Lucier, who had a little place at Chicken Springs and rode stray man for the Boston Company's HM iron when he needed money; Eddy Orr, who had a freight outfit that served the valley down to Wikiup.

Eddy Orr, broad of shoulder, waist, and hip, tied the valley together and Wikiup to the world at large. He hauled the mail and the things they could not make themselves—horseshoes, coffee, block salt, airtights, matches, and the like. In the process, he absorbed, flavored, and transmitted the news of those he served. At Wikiup, he delivered himself of what he'd heard, like a boy dropping stones down a well to hear the splash, and picked up what he could for general edification going back.

"Hear Price Parks come back from Congress Junction 'thout sellin' them horses he took down," he said, and shifted his legs to get a better purchase against the wall with his back. "He could've paid out his note at the bank if he had."

Old Man Stradley, busy with his knife and a can of greengages, snorted like a buck deer and gnawed his mustaches in concentration. Bran Hurd in the doorway said nothing, and Harry Lucier, his long length folded against his heels like a carpenter's rule, seemed lost in the effort of rolling a cigarette. Eddy Orr stretched luxuriously and waited.

Harry finished making his cigarette and looked up at Hurd. "Gimme one of them Native Sons, Bran."

Hurd extracted a square block from his vest pocket and handed it down. Lucier peeled off a sliver of wood with a fair share of tipping and scraped it into spluttering life, reeking of sulphur. His narrow face puckered in distaste as he got a lungful with his first drag.

"They must be mighty close t' hell in Californy," he grumbled. "Everythin' you get from there—matches, prunes, everythin'—is plumb loaded, Bran." He turned to Eddy Orr before the storekeeper could reply.

"Speakin' of Parks, you heard right," he said. "I helped him haze them broomtails down an' I helped haze 'em back, eatin' rock an' drinkin' mirage both ways. Only we don't call him Price no more." He looked quizzically at Eddy Orr.

"I'm listenin'." Eddy's voice was as comfortable as his position.

" 'Member you was the one givin' up head here awhile back 'bout a fellow goin' to be at Congress to buy horses?"

Eddy nodded. "Figured there was some t' sell hereabouts."

"Oh, there was," agreed Lucier quickly. "Lots of 'em, mostly Stubby's. That's Parks's new name," he added. "Short for stubborn. But there was one or a dozen of mine didn't look near as good to me as the price I heard that gent was goin' to pay." He sighed.

Eddy caught the sigh and the lugubrious look that went with it. "It come t' me that he was buyin' anything with four legs an' a whinny. Didn't you cash in on him?"

"You want t' hear this, Eddy, or you want t' guess some more? Make it easy on yourself. I ain't hurried none."

"Me neither," agreed Eddy Orr. "Got 'til tomorrow 'fore I starts back. But, Harry," he grinned boyishly, "I ain't apt t' be hurried none nex' time you want a li'l jag of freight hustled down from the railroad."

"Ain't it hell t' be dependent on people like freighters an' storekeepers an' sech?" mourned Harry Lucier. "Man can't call his debts his own."

Old Man Stradley had opened the airtight at this point. He snorted again before he speared the first greengage with his knife point and transferred it to his mouth. Lucier ignored the im-

plied comment in the snort and settled himself more firmly on his heels.

"When Bran here told me what you'd said 'bout that horse buyer, why I took it as pure Gospel, like Leviticus quotin' the Good Book. I didn't even wait to talk Bran out of a bill of goods on credit. An' I didn't bother t' wind the clock when I left the ranch with my li'l gatherin' of stove-up brush-poppers and mocky mares."

"Where does Parks come in on the deal?" asked Eddy fretfully.

"That come because of my generous nature," said Harry placidly. "I drifted my gather down by Three Corners an' give *Stubby* the glad tidings. Stubby, he took it as evidence of his own good sense. Mebbe a li'l late comin' t' light, but still, she'd come. 'I allus knew there was money in raisin' horses,' he says.

"It took us a day t' gather mebbe fifty-sixty head of his precious Steeldust stock. Then another day for Stubby t' give himself reasons why they wasn't worth keepin' as much as some of his others. Then it took us some few days to go from his place to there, meanin' Congress Junction. An' all the time, I was ridin' along mopin' about how Stubby turned out t' be smarter'n the rest of us that had hoorawed him for startin' a horse spread."

"He ain't smarter," snorted Old Man Stradley. He licked the sweet syrup off his mustaches and speared another plum. "He's jus' more bullheaded."

"He puts on his hat an' makes up his mind for the day," agreed Lucier. "Howsomever, we gets t' Congress some thirsty. I had t' prime myself 'fore I could spit. We has a swim in the stock troughs an' the railroad agent brings the buyer over t' see what we got corralled.

"It's hotter'n hell with the draft up, but this jasper is wearin' pants that choked him an' boots clear t' his knees. His coat must've weighed a pound t' each thread. He's got him a coal-scuttle hat made o' cork an' a piece of windowpane screwed down in one eye. His face is the color of fresh beef an' he gargles his words like a turkey gobbler struttin' after a hen. The agent does the translatin'.

"This jasper says he'll give us five pounds apiece for every head we got in the pens. I don't feel real easy 'til the agent gives us the figures in E Pluribus Spendum. We give the agent our names, an' Santa Claus in go-to-hell pants hauls out a checkbook an' starts operations.

"Everythin' is goin' just fine 'til Stubby cocks his head an' asks the agent who this gent's repping for. The agent puffs up like a prune-fed calf an' says he's an officer in the British Army buyin' mounts for them t' use in South Africa where they got a war on.

"I see Stubby rare back in his saddle an' start thinkin'. He reaches for his makin's an' remembers he ain't got any left. He looks over at me with them copper-stain eyes of his flickerin' like sunlight on bull-quartz an' asks how do I feel about them Boers.

"I tell him I don't give one good goddam who fights who that far off. Stubby don't cotton t' that answer but it don't bother me none. That lime-juicer in choke-bored pants has got off his rump an' the checks he hands us is covered with dollar signs. I folds mine with lovin' care an' can see myself takin' the cars back east t' Albuquerque t' visit my folks, just like the prodigal calf. 'Bout that time, Stubby tears his check into li'l pieces an' spits on 'em 'fore he throws the mess at the

guy that wrote it.

"'It ain't in me t' take money for helpin' you murder them Dutchmen,' he says an' his voice sounds like a file workin' rusty iron.

"The limejuicer gets purple in the face but he don't say nothin'. Just peels off his coat an' that parasol hat he's wearin'. Stubby ain't overweighed with hardware since he done shucked it an' his chaps when he took his swim. Him an' that red-faced rooster have the goddamdest fight I ever seen, boot to boot an' punchin'. The agent hops up an' down like he'd stepped in an anthill an' I'm prayin' he'll deal himself a hand in the game."

Harry Lucier's eyes were joyous with memory of that encounter. He stopped talking, as if casting back for each detail of every blow, recalling the dust, the sun, the harried railroad man, and the two figures slugging it out because of a war half the world removed.

"They still squabblin', Harry?" queried Bran Hurd from the doorway. He had seen Parks when he came back but hadn't heard the story; Stubby never talked much about himself.

"No-o-o, not exackly," said Harry unblushingly. "When they can't swing no more, they just stop an' inspect one another with damages bein' even on both sides. Stubby sticks out his hand an' the limey shakes it, tryin' t' grin with the good side of his mouth. Then he picks up his coat, brushes it off real careful, an' hauls out a flat silver bottle. Him an' Stubby have a horn out of it an' then I joins in. Man! That was drinkin' likker!

"The agent, he starts givin' up head 'bout one thing an' another 'til I reminds him I ain't tired one damn bit. He mopes off toward the depot an' the three of us have a real nice time 'til that bottle is gone. The limey says somethin' at us which we don't quite savvy but it sounds friendly. Then he wobbles off.

"Me 'n Stubby stick around the water trough whilst he soaks his head to get the swellin's down. I point it out to him real plain that there's plenty more horses for His Nibs t' buy an' we might as well get our share. Stubby explains t' me that he'd have to climb a ladder t' shake hands with Judas Iscariot if his *caballos* went t' fight them Dutchmen. 'Course, he figgers the Boers'd have 'em stole soon's they got off the boat but he can't take that chance. Says he don't mind fightin' if it's a fair shake all 'round but there's too many Englishers in the game for that. I won't say he's bullheaded, just stubborn."

"I knowed he read books an' such," mused Eddy Orr, "but I never knowed he was plumb crazy. Hell, he could've come out on top sellin' them horses."

"He ain't crazy," snapped Bran Hurd. There was strong feeling in his voice. "He may be hubbin' hell on a starve-out but he ain't lonesome without money an' he ain't less of a man tryin' to come by it. That's more'n most can say. He's honest inside where can't nobody see it but him, mostly."

"He's honest a'right," snapped Old Man Stradley, "but mostly he just don't give a damn." He wiped his knife blade along his pants and set the empty can by his side. "Long's he's around I won't feel too bad 'bout th' way I turned out."

"Nor me neither," said Harry Lucier. He fished out his sack and began building another smoke. "Me 'n Stubby turns our horses out of the pens, holds 'em on the flats for a day 'til they get

grassed up some an' Stubby can sit a saddle 'thout achin' all over, an' then we moseys on home."

"You didn't sell yours neither?" asked Eddy Orr in some surprise. "Thought you didn't care who was fightin' who?"

"I didn't an' I don't," said Harry Lucier, too carelessly. "Gimme a match, Bran. I just figured somebody had t' pay the price of admission for that fight Stubby put on."

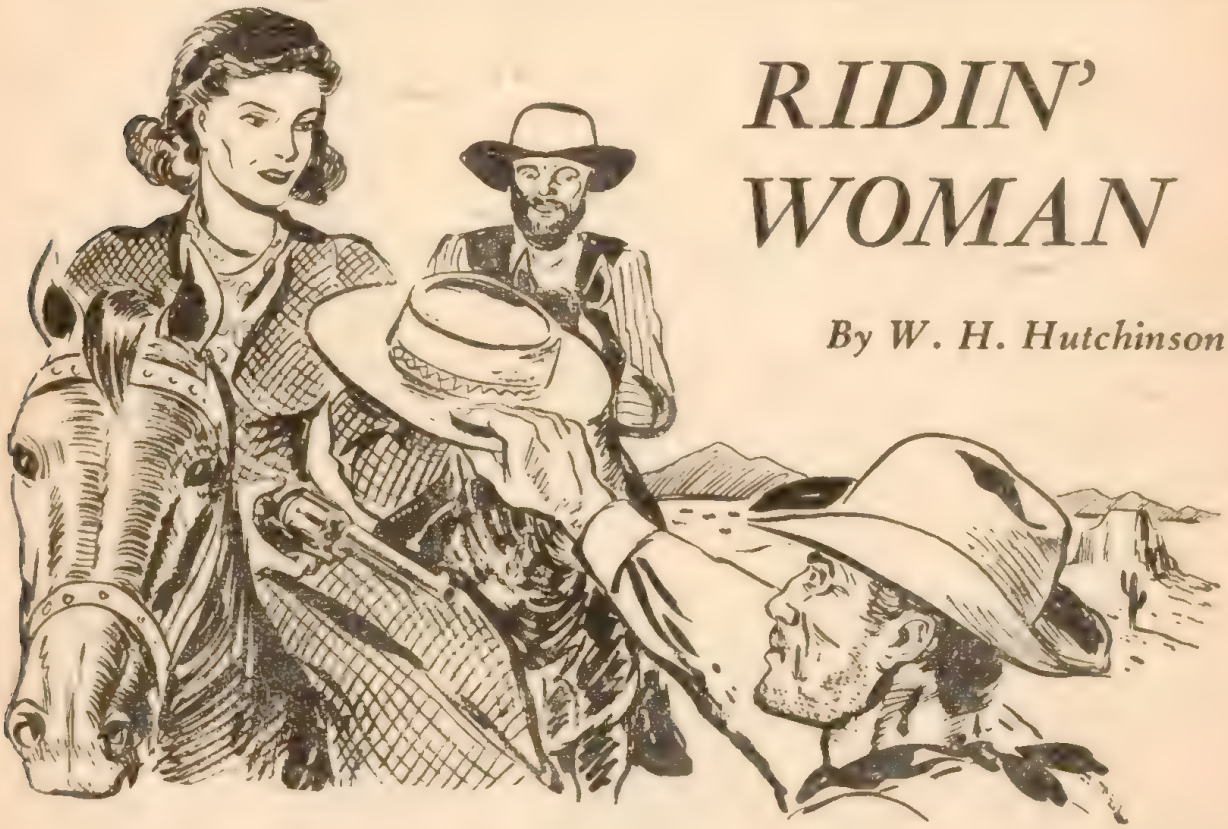
SWIMMIN' THE HERD

By S. OMAR BARKER

WHEN they hit the crossin' flooded with a herd of steers to swim,
The ol'-time cowboy knowed for sure that hell was up to him.
Them longhorns sure got snuffy when they smelt that muddy tide,
And didn't claim no kinfolks over on the other side.
You had to keep 'em crowded or the steers up in the lead
Would spook back from the water's edge and start a big stampede.
Sometimes you throwed loose hosses in to swim the crossin' first,
In hope the steers would foller; but the thing that was the worst
Was when they started millin' just about halfway acrost,
And the cowboys had to bust it up, no matter what the cost.
When your pony hit the water on the down side of the herd,
You couldn't help but wonder, when your gal was brought the word
That you had died of drowndin', if she'd grieve a month or two
Before she plumb forgot you for some other buckaroo.
You felt your pony swimmin' strong, you reached the deadly mill,
You swang your doubled rope-end and you hollered fit to kill.
You just might git some leaders sorter headed toward the bank,
When floatin' driftwood hit your hoss and rolled him; as he sank
You found yourself sucked under by a current strong and fast,
Plumb sure that every minute was a-goin' to be your last.
It might be you was lucky and got washed up on the shore,
A-swearin' you would never ride the cow trails any more.
(Of course you never meant it, for it wasn't cowboy blood
To quit with no more reason than a lung half full of mud!)
But some boys wasn't lucky, and a little pile of stones
Would mark the final bivouac of a drownded trail hand's bones.

Some say the ol'-time cowboy was a humdrum hired hand,
Without no claim to glory—but they just don't understand
The nature of them buckaroos, so frolicky and gay,
Who rode with death and danger at their stirrups every day;
Who turned stampedes at midnight and who never asked the boss
For somethin' safe and easy when they had a crick to cross!

Flaunting a blithe disregard for property rights, the comely young widow carved out a notable niche for herself in the outlaws' hall of fame.



RIDIN' WOMAN

By W. H. Hutchinson

SHE was born at a time and place when a female was supposed to be either a lady or a slut and to act accordingly. This prevented embarrassing social errors all around. Myra Belle Shirley simply refused to be card-indexed for ready reference. She conducted her own life by her own rules, starting from scratch on February 3, 1846, in Carthage, Missouri, where her parents, John and Eliza Shirley, kept slaves, blooded horses, and the leading hotel.

Little Myra Belle grew up with an admiring hotel audience always around her. Her audience grew larger as she grew older—a vivacious brunette, deep-chested and high-bosomed, with a voice that made old men recall their youth and a face that made young men regret their two left feet. Rumor said there was Cherokee in the Shirley strain, but not out loud. Her physical attributes were coupled with less subtle accomplishments.

She rode sidesaddle from early girlhood, not genteelly clopping along on a pensioned plow nag but hell-for-leather on the best horseflesh in the county. When politics and liquor got together in the hotel barroom, they fissioned into language that was not polite but had a useful purpose, and Belle learned it by simple exposure. She learned, too, the code of the country—courtesy to a woman, violence to an enemy. These were her assets in her fifteenth year when the sullen guns at Fort Sumter spoke their message.

The War Between the States came

to the Kansas-Missouri borderlands as a welcome relief and the chance to even up personal scores in the odor of sanctity. The leading exponent of the Southern, or Missouri and Shirley, side of the argument was a strangely sexless megalomaniac named William Clarke Quantrell. Belle's brother, Edward, joined him at once, as did the other young men in Belle's social set. They set her a powerful example.

Belle knew everybody and every bypath in an orbit that covered the towns of Carthage, Lamar, Greenfield, Dug Spring, Newtonia, and Neosho. Folks were used to seeing her riding alone, visiting, racing, doing whatever came into her head. They thought nothing of it when she continued to do it during war times. She visited Confederate and Union sympathizers alike; never obvious in her feelings, never violating polite manners, managing to be faintly superior to all she visited or met. It took almost a year of war for the harassed "blue-bellies" to establish a connection between Miss Belle's social visits and the subsequent visitations from Quantrell's men.

The evidence was largely circumstantial—like finding a drowned cat in a cream jar. It posed a certain problem, too. There was still a chivalrous reluctance in those times to kill a woman, especially a pretty woman, and Miss Belle really qualified for that title. The only apparent solution came to a certain Major Enos, who headquartered his Union cavalry at Newtonia in the spring of 1862.

Major Enos had a counter-intelligence service working for him this spring morning. He knew that Ed Shirley, now a captain with Quantrell, was openly visiting his home. He looked out his office window, and there rode Miss Belle, all eyes and innocence, on a visit to Newtonia. Major Enos felt that this was the time for him to mend her ways by scaring her.

While Belle made her social rounds, Major Enos sent a squad of troopers toward Carthage to lay Ed Shirley by the heels. When they had a good start, a blue-coated patrol brought Miss Belle into the major's presence, like young hounds with their first bobcat. Major Enos warned Miss Belle to stop her nonsense or face the consequences of armed rebellion, or treason, or both. In return she cussed him quite adequately. He told her that a patrol had ridden after her brother, and she quirted him. He took the quirt and admonished her to mend her ways. She sang him Confederate songs in high defiance. After an hour of this, Major Enos let her go, feeling that he had done his best and knowing that war was hell.

The cavalry squad had taken the road to Carthage at regulation gait. Belle took the short cuts and laid on the leather. When the Federals surrounded the Shirley hotel toward sundown, Miss Belle opened the door to inform them that Captain Shirley regretted he had been unable to wait for them. The patrol jogged wearily back to face Major Enos and Belle basked in warm, Southern adulation. It was the high spot of her sixteen years to date, and she, being feminine, ate it up.

Ed Shirley did not live out the year of his deliverance from Major Enos. Not even Belle Shirley could change the hard fact that the Confederate cause fared ill as the war wore on. On a drizzly April day at Appomattox Courthouse, far from the raw Missouri borderlands, it became *The Lost Cause*, except in the hearts of its people.

John Shirley found Missouri too filled with new-made Unionists for a refined person's stomach. He went to Texas, family and all, settling on a farm about two hours' ride on a good horse outside of Dallas. The climate was more congenial here.

The Shirleys were of like mind with their neighbors; they all disliked Yankees. They were obviously "qual'ty folks," not carpetbaggers, and they had enough money to live as poorly as the rest of the linsey-woolsey set. Also, they had a daughter who was easier on the eyes than the native bluebonnets and infinitely more disturbing to the senses.

Belle was a lodestone for all the young bloods within riding distance. It was a known fact that the Shirley place offered sanctuary—a meal and a fresh horse and a closed mouth—to anyone who had "fit th' Yankees." Belle queened it over local and long riders alike without serious involvement until the past caught up with her in the person of James Reed.

He was a quiet, well-raised young man from a good Missouri family. He had ridden with Quantrell and hadn't been able to change his habits—an acquired taste for good horses and no sense of property rights whatsoever. This was no barrier to a warm reception from the Shirleys. In fact, it was a good recommend. Jim Reed, however, had more than his taste in horseflesh and his past record.

Within twenty-four hours, he had asked Belle to marry him and she had accepted his proposal. They broke the news to Father, and the old gentleman almost had a stroke. Jim Reed as a friend was one thing; as a son-in-law, his life expectancy was too short. John Shirley's rage was wondrous to see and hear, and it seemed effective.

Next day, Jim and Belle went riding off to attend a picnic. Instead, they were married on horseback, Belle sidesaddle as always, by a nearby justice of the peace. But Jim Reed's past caught up with him on the very day of his marriage. Some say John Shirley helped it along. Jim split the breeze ahead of the warrant and Belle returned to the parental roof to present her father with an accomplished fact. John Shirley did not take it quietly.

Belle was clapped into a young ladies' seminary where locks were numerous and chaperones were experienced. Shortly thereafter, Jim Reed dropped by the school, between dodging the law, and abducted his wife with her downright connivance. They went across country to Jim's parents' house in Rich Hill, Missouri, where Belle stayed while Jim did his best to keep his status as husband from changing into corpse. While he was hiding out, John Shirley appeared at Rich Hill and re-abducted his wayward daughter. Some say he sent her to a relative's ranch in Colorado. Some say he simply took her home to Texas and trusted in a muley gun loaded with "blue whistlers" to keep her there. In either event, Jim Reed showed up again and reclaimed his wife for good.

How long this game of bride-and-seek went on is anybody's guess. Belle's daughter, Pearl, was not born until 1869, almost three years after the marriage on horseback. Not even a grandchild could cool John Shirley's choler. Belle lived with Jim's parents in Missouri, while Jim found refuge and profit in the Indian Territory, a handy place for a man whose warped sense of property rights was aggravated by the need to be a good provider.

This life pattern broke up in a cloud of gunsmoke. Jim's brother, Scott Reed, was killed, in error, by members of a family named Shannon. Leaving three dead Shannons to show that their mistake had been fatal, Jim and Belle and baby Pearl sloped for the Pacific Coast. One fact and one story high-light this two-year Odyssey: a son named Edward was born to them in Los Angeles about 1871; and they outwitted a sheriff through Belle's dexterity with a standard item of household furniture that fitted the sheriff's head more tightly than his hat and was much more confining until he got a friend to break it off.

Leaving the sheriff to pick up the pieces, the Reeds returned to Texas in 1872, where the grandson mollified John Shirley. He helped Belle acquire a neighboring ranch while Jim Reed again found sanctuary in the Indian Territory. His hide-out was with Tom Starr, a turbulent head of a large Cherokee clan. Jim had good company at Tom Starr's—the James boys and the Youngers, among others from his Quantrell days. And Belle came riding up from Texas to console his days on the dodge, at frequent intervals.

Jim's stay with Tom Starr came to an end in 1873 when a band of men extracted $30,000, more or less, from Watt Grayson, a Creek, by the simple expedient of hanging Watt, and his wife, until Watt talked. The pranksters believed that they got tribal funds which Grayson had diverted to his own ends. Thus, they expected little outcry from their victim. However, the word got around that Jim Reed had been recognized among those present at Grayson's discomfiture. Jim, knowing that Creek justice paid no attention to due process, chose the lesser of two evils. He joined his wife in Texas where Belle assumed command and control of the family fortunes.

With Jim's share of Watt Grayson's loss, Belle opened a livery stable in Dallas, posing as the wife of a hunted ex-Confederate doing her best to support herself and her two babies. The role she chose was a sure passport to respectability during Reconstruction in Texas and she had the looks and the manners to make it stick. She was careful, too, not to give the Dallas dowagers any juicy tidbits of scandal. She joined the best church, sang ravishingly in the choir of a Sunday, and entertained social gatherings with piano selections. She became sassiety with a large S and she played her role with the skill of a born actress. It was a fat part, both socially and financially.

Everybody felt sorry for the brave young wife who had to take long rides alone to meet her husband where Governor Davis's Negro police could not find them. Men who could not reach her heart with their charms patronized her livery stable. It was only sour-mouth critics who mentioned that her livestock invariably wore brands from the Territory, or some other place that wasn't Texas. The majority figured that this was Belle's business—and wasn't she pretty!

Actually, the livery stable was a fence for horses that Jim Reed stole. They made a competent team as husband and wife. Belle handled the business and political ends and Jim did the field work. This happy situation was too good to last.

Jim's present operations were conducted where Federal law prevailed, as was the case in the Watt Grayson affair and other less spectacular but equally annoying misdemeanors. There

were warrants out for him as a matter of course and, more important, there was a sizable chunk of Federal reward money for Jim Reed, dead or alive. The word got around but it cut no ice in Dallas. No Texan worth the name would stoop to collecting Federal blood money for the crimes charged against an ex-Confederate like Jim Reed. Mr. John Morris—at least, that was his "go-by"—was the exception who proved the rule.

Morris had a plan, perhaps the first by that name, and he put it into effect with success, up to a point. Meeting Reed in Dallas in the summer of 1875, he posed as a wanted man with a case history much like his quarry's. He could ride, he could shoot, he needed money, and blue-colored cloth hurt his eyes. He honeyswoggled Jim Reed into taking him along on a trip north after fresh stock for the livery stable. He must have been a good actor, since there is no evidence that Belle was suspicious of him.

The two men stopped at a farmhouse near McKinney, Texas, to take a meal. Telling Jim that the farmer was a friend of his, Morris shed his hardware on the porch and Jim followed his example. As they enjoyed their meal, Morris found a plausible excuse to leave the table to go outdoors. Retrieving his pistol on the porch, he quite thoroughly killed Jim Reed as the first step in his plan.

Collecting the reward money required Morris to secure a positive identification of Jim Reed's body before witnesses. It being summer in Texas, the identification had to be made quickly. What quicker, more positive identification could be asked than by the deceased's widow? Morris sent word to Dallas for Mrs. Reed and visions of all that money must have danced in his mind when he saw her dismount in the sun-baked yard, gather her skirts, and step gracefully up the sun-warped steps into the sweltering house.

Almost ten full years had swelled and died since that day when Belle Shirley and James Reed were married on horseback. They had been years filled with the wine of living and the spice of danger, years heavy with the love that comes only when a primeval woman gives herself without reservation. A faintly ironic smile touched the corners of Belle's mouth as she turned to the waiting Morris and his witnesses.

"You must have made a mistake," she said firmly. "If you want the reward for Jim Reed, you will have to kill Jim Reed."

Morris had made no other arrangements for identification. Belle's refusal to let him profit by her husband's death left him no choice but to bury his victim in a nameless grave as speedily as possible.

Whatever else Belle Shirley had been, or would become, this one Spartan gesture sets her well apart from the other lady wildcats of the West. By all rights, her story should end on this note of personal triumph but it cannot be. It is the next fourteen years that have made her name live in song and story and misguided moving pictures.

Back in Dallas, a twenty-nine-year-old widow with two children, Belle saw no reason to lower her standards of living or change her means of livelihood. But what had been quite proper for a brave young wife became quite quotable about a beautiful young widow.

Her long, lone rides made people

talk! When these same rides became associated in many minds with the disappearance of good horses owned by honest Texans, folks got downright suspicious. Still, the old estimate of Belle Reed was hard to shake, particularly among the masculine population. She got by for several years before a minor accident brought matters to a head.

Making a ride one day in a biting wind, she took shelter in the lee of a country store and built a fire to keep warm. When the building burned down, no one was more put out than Belle. She was even more chagrined when she was lodged in durance vile on charges of arson and malicious mischief. She took her confinement with haughty grace and coppered her bets by seeing to it that her friends in high places would do the necessary.

An elderly gentleman from the thickets attended her publicized trial out of curiosity. He was heavy with this world's goods and he had a libido that did nip-ups at the sight of the fair prisoner. He became enamored some $2500 worth for legal fees and the like, as soon as Belle realized what ailed him. Thereafter, the arson charge was dismissed and the malicious-mischief charge settled for a nominal fine, thanks to Belle's influence. She came out of the court some $2000 to the good. Her elderly benefactor had the satisfaction of knowing that he had not lost his money trying to fill an inside straight.

With cash in hand, and the handwriting on the wall, Belle sent her children to live with Jim's parents in Missouri. She herself took to the Wild Bunch openly, and had no trouble raising recruits.

Headquartering in the Territory, Belle raided from Tascosa in the Panhandle east to Kansas, dipping into Texas whenever it looked profitable. Banks, trail herds, stage coaches, anything that promised a profit was grist to her mill. She planned the jobs, gave the orders, took the lioness's share of the loot, and was the guiding intelligence behind men like Blue Duck, Jim French, Jack Spaniard, and others. They treated her like a lady, or else! Blue Duck stayed glued in his saddle when Belle's hat blew off once, but he learned. Belle showed him the open end of a large Colt— "Damn your greasy hide, pick up that hat and don't *ever* forget your manners again."

The tall tales grew apace with her success:

She could shoot a bumblebee off a thistle at fifty yards while riding at a gallop.

She strode into a Dodge City dive one night and cashed in her six-shooter for $8000, saying, "I'm Belle. You fleeced one of my boys in here and I'm taking it back. I'm good for it if you want to come after it."

Playing her Southern-widow role for all it was worth, she captivated a small cow town to such degree that the banker's wife asked her to be their house guest. The banker, naturally, was delighted when Belle proposed a midnight rendezvouz in his bank. They met, embraced, and the banker opened his safe under the persuasion of a pistol muzzle behind his ear. His explanation to his wife was no concern of Belle's. She was long gone with the tangible assets, to seek greener fields without a gang following her.

She went first to Ogallala, Nebraska, with young Sam Starr, son of her husband's friend from other days. She began to be known as Belle Starr, al-

though she and Sam were not legally married for a full eighteen months, not until they left Nebraska and returned to the Cherokee Nation. They left Nebraska when it became too apparent that the birth rate among their cattle was abnormally high.

Sam and Belle took up a thousand-acre claim on the tribal lands at Youngers Bend of the Canadian River, some eight miles from Eufaula, county seat today of McIntosh County, Oklahoma. They built a comfortable log house and Belle made it a showplace with a real puncheon floor, curtains at the windows, a piano, a bookcase, everything! Belle had her clothes made to the latest mode out of the best materials, and took trips to Fort Smith, Arkansas, and other eastern centers when she felt the need for refined company. Gradually, however, a strong odor of outlawry attached itself to the showplace at Youngers Bend. The U. S. marshals who brought law to the Territory had suspicions but nothing else until they finally got a conviction against Belle and Sam for stealing a blooded colt that was providentially found in one of the Starr pastures. The sentence was light, a year in the Detroit house of correction, but when they returned home, they found the old free life was fading fast.

Even though no wagon road reached to the house at Youngers Bend, the country was becoming settled in outlook and with bob-wire. The new generation had no deep interest in the Civil War loyalties that had served the long riders well in the border states. Sam made an error in judgment robbing a post office and was killed awaiting trial. Belle was tried within a year for horse theft but this time she beat the rap. She was smart enough again to see the handwriting on the wall, and she knew she was getting old.

She seems to have settled back in bitter isolation, feeling everything she had taken from life with two strong, eager hands trickling slowly through her fingers. Her two children were living their own lives, as impetuous as Belle Shirley-Reed-Starr had ever been, and she had no control over them. She no longer had the will, or the physical equipment, to bend men to her bidding. All she had left was her knowledge of certain men outside the law and she used this for her own ends until it backfired.

On February 3, 1889, Belle rode across her property on a good horse, sidesaddle as always. Some two miles from her lonely house, she passed a fence corner where the weeds grew rank and tall in the angle of the rails. A shotgun spoke sullenly from the covert as she showed her back, and Belle's forty-third birthday was her last.

She left behind her a mass of rank legends, guesses, and misconceptions as to what she did and was. It seems pistol-plain. She was a woman who took what she wanted when she wanted it, without regard for propriety and without vain regrets. And if Jack Thorp heard it right, she was the woman who left behind her one of the West's immortal songs, whose last verse is as good an epitaph as any:

Now, all you young maidens where'er you reside,
Beware of the cowboy who swings the rawhide.
He'll court you and pet you and leave you and go
In the spring up the Trail on his bucking bronco.

A Western Classic by Bertrand W. Sinclair

The new hand in the fancy cowboy trimmin's is manna from heaven to the Half Moon jokesters.

The Jocular Pilgrim

MIKE STRATTON came jingling down a fork of Serviceberry with the last of that spring day's sun making the shadow of his horse slant before him. To right and left a pair of riders flanked him. Before them a bunch of Half Moon saddle horses fled like antelope, wild as hawks with six months' freedom. These turned a bend, slowed up at sight of fluttering tents, wagons, smoke from a supper fire, men walking about, all the muster of a roundup. Wherefore these high-stomached Half Moons lifted their heads still higher, nickered to their fellows, and trotted to join the saddle bunch grazing under the watchful eye of the wrangler, their equine intelligence apprising them that winter holidays were over.

Mike and his riders unsaddled by the rope corral, stalked over to the chuck tent to eat a belated supper. And as they passed the bed wagon Mike's gaze took in a figure, a gaudy figure, perched on the wagon tongue among the harness, where no cowpuncher ever sat in his hour of ease.

If the man had come into roundup camp wearing spats, a monocle, a cutaway coat, and a derby he could not have better advertised his unfamiliarity with the range than he did by wearing everything any range rider ever wore, anytime, anywhere. It was like a woman wearing an elaborate afternoon

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dress to a country picnic.

Mike needed only a glance. He saw it all with a faint grin of amusement—wide-brimmed Stetson, bright blue neckerchief, black silk shirt, stiff batwing chaps, boots with exaggerated heels, spurs with enormous rowels, a Colt in a much-stamped holster—all creaky, shiny-new, loud, cheap. A mail-order stockhand. You got them with two dozen 4X coffee coupons.

Mike noted Johnny Robb's derisive stare. Mike said nothing. He was newly appointed range boss of the Half Moon. Not much more than a boy himself, younger perhaps than the imitation range rider on the wagon tongue. Yet he was in charge of a big outfit, and a roundup boss has both dignity and authority to maintain. Still, a joke was a joke. Mike and Johnny Robb exchanged comprehending glances. They lifted a mutual eyebrow.

Mike and Johnny and Dave Hunt squatted inside the cook tent with plates in their laps. The cook hovered over them paternally. He was a thick-waisted man of forty, who had been feeding cowboys for many years, and took a decent pride in his work.

"Reckon it done escaped from somebody's Wild West show?" he asked the world at large.

"Uh-uh," a rider who had come in to get a drink answered him. "That there's a cowboy. You better speak respectful of cowpunchers, you darned old pot wrassler, or you're liable to get shot in the paunch with one of your own biscuits."

"That," Dave Hunt remarked, "would sure be fatal."

The cook grinned. The three finished their supper, chucked their plates into the dishpan, and rolled cigarettes. A rider or two lounged in. With the sun gone, a chill came in the evening air and the sheet-iron cookstove gave out a pleasant warmth.

"How did it come to camp?" Johnny Robb inquired. "Walk, swim, or fly? Does it talk or just make signs?"

"It's part human," his neighbor responded. "Dumped itself off the Landusky stage this afternoon an' walked into camp packin' a stock saddle on its back. Sure a gaudy pilgrim."

The flap of the chuck tent lifted and the gaudy pilgrim came diffidently in, innocent-eyed, a lamb, had he but guessed, offering himself to the slaughter, despite the .45 on his hip.

His age was anywhere between twenty and twenty-five. His face bore little mark of wind and weather, being rosy and round. He was rather undersized, and except for the decorative details of his costume would have passed anywhere without comment.

But he had overdressed the part. Everything that any cowpuncher ever wore at work or play he had on. In the eyes of these very practical young men the effect was ludicrous, a matter for sport. He was like a little Lord Fauntleroy fallen among ribald schoolboys.

Over the pilgrim's shoulder, an impish, brick-red countenance grinned and bestowed a wink on Mike Stratton. Dick Burgess, aged nineteen, range-bred, competent to rope, throw, and hog-tie a steer in record time, able to ride anything in the shape of a horse, garbed plainly in overalls and a blue serge coat, steered the pilgrim.

"There's the boss," said he.

"I heard in Malta," said the pilgrim, "that the Half Moon was startin' roundup. So I come out to see if I could get a job. I'd like to ride on roundup."

"What for?" Mike asked gravely. "Only fellers that's hidin' from the sheriff or ain't able to get a job tendin' bar wants to ride roundup."

"Well," the pilgrim seemed slightly abashed, "I want to be a cowboy."

"Ain't you?" Mike asked.

The pilgrim shifted uneasily from one high heel to the other. Johnny Robb gazed at him solemnly. They all did, for a minute.

"Oh, he would be a cowboy and with the cowboys stand,
With leather chaps upon his legs and a six-gun in his hand;
A long rawhide reata,
A big Colt's forty-five;
He'll make a noble cowboy as sure as you're alive."

Johnny recited this in a drone, without inflection, as if it were a sort of dirge. Johnny's doggerel evidently put Mike's query aside. The pilgrim looked doubtful. Mike Stratton didn't need that question answered anyway. And all at once he felt a little sorry for this palpable tenderfoot whose capacity was nowise equal to either his ambition or his costume.

No roundup boss conducts a range kindergarten. The scope of a roundup's activities requires every man to be a cog meshing smoothly with every other cog to make a useful machine. Mike Stratton had twenty riders and forty thousand cattle to handle. His men had to know their business. A bit of luck, manifest courage, competence and honesty, had but recently put Mike in charge of the Half Moon. He had his own spurs to win, in a sense.

"If all the boys that promised turn up, I'll be full-handed," he said kindly. "But you can stay with the wagon for a spell, if you like. Somethin' might turn up."

What Mike really meant was that some ranch job might offer—or the pilgrim could get a ride back to town. But the pilgrim brightened, thanked Mike, and withdrew to the bed tent, where he listened wide-eared to a crossfire of talk that was largely for his benefit. Seldom the Lord delivered so tender a morsel into their hands. They would have shared blankets and money with the pilgrim in trouble, but he was manna in the way of diversion.

The Half Moon was picking up the last of its loose saddle stock off the open range. In a week they would foregather with the Circle Diamond, the Ragged H, and the YT. Over a land where new green thrust like a velvet pile up through matted, winter-bleached grass, they would sweep from creek to creek, from ridge to ridge, making the spring roundup to mark the calves. There would be wild riding from dawn to dusk, swishing ropes, hot irons, sweat and strain and haste around branding-fires under a blazing sun.

Mike settled in his blankets thinking of this, forgetful of the gaudy innocent who would be a cowboy. But he was reminded of him as the crew gathered for breakfast.

The pilgrim gobbled his food like the rest, but he left his plate, tin cup, knife, and fork lying where he ate instead of putting them in the dishpan—and the cook grunted as he walked over to pick them up. Later in the chill gold and pink of sunrise, when horses were being caught and harnessed for chuck and bed wagons the pilgrim stood by, patently at a loss, the only man of sixteen men who was not moving with speed and certainty to some necessary task.

Tents down, everything stowed, teams ready, they caught their mounts. Mike recalled that the pilgrim was afoot. But he had a saddle.

"Catch him a horse," he commanded Johnny Robb.

Mike neglected to specify what kind of a horse, and Johnny used his own judgment. Johnny had been with the Half Moon two seasons. He knew every horse in the *remuda*. Out of threescore mounts as yet unallotted to riders Johnny had considerable choice.

Mike had a momentary misgiving when he saw the pilgrim cinching an ancient Gallup & Frazier double-rig on a sleepy-eyed bay, a very model of equine docility. The pilgrim might get his back dusted, but he couldn't get hurt on that soft ground. And it was no part of a wagon boss's duty to protect greenhorns from practical jokes.

The two wagons rolled off, tooled by the cook and the nighthawk. The saddle bunch strung out on the trail. Last of all the cowpunchers began to mount. Here and there one was very tender with fractious steed.

Johnny Robb edged over beside Mike. So did Dick Burgess, redheaded, anticipatory. The gentlest cowhorse is apt to pitch on a chill spring morning. But this pair paid no attention to sundry leaps and plunges and mild cursings at other points. They kept watch of the pilgrim, as he put his foot in the stirrup and swung up on the mild-looking bay.

With the weight of a man in his middle the bay woke up. He took three or four quick, mincing steps, shook his head fretfully, and bounced stiff-legged, his head down and his back arched like an angry tomcat. Whereupon, he and the pilgrim parted company.

By some strange defiance of the law of gravity the pilgrim described a graceful parabola in the air, turned clean over, and alighted squarely on his feet. And there he stood, the beetred of deep shame mounting in his round cheeks, while the bay horse stood a little aside, quite tranquil, simulating such astonishment as a broken cowpony sometimes does when he throws a man.

"You done darned well," Mike said encouragingly. "There ain't another man in the outfit coulda dismounted as graceful as you did, pilgrim. Keep his head up. Hold your reins tight. He won't likely buck again, anyhow."

The same ribald streak that sends titters through a crowd when some portly citizen steps on something slippery and sits down on the sidewalk sent snickers through the Half Moon riders. The bewildered expression on the pilgrim's face did not abate their mirth.

The pilgrim gingerly approached the bay once more, gathered up his reins, put his foot in the stirrup. Once more the mild-mannered brute set out at a sedate trot, with a dozen lusty voices advising the pilgrim to hold up his head. And again the bay leaped suddenly straight into the air, this time with a loud derisive snort.

Only this time the pilgrim did not part company with his gyrating mount. True, he lost everything, including his presence of mind. His reins flew. His big hat sailed off like a kite. His ample neckerchief climbed up over his chin and muffled his parted lips as his head snapped back and forth. But he stayed somewhere on top, while the bay horse bucked with extreme earnestness.

Both the pilgrim's feet were out of his stirrups. His hands clawed at mane, saddle horn, wherever he could

get hold. He got crosswise of his saddle, behind the cantle once. By all the rules of the game he should have been thrown a dozen times. He *was* all but thrown a dozen times. Yet, somehow, he managed to stay, more or less, on top of that nine hundred pounds of violently agitated horse.

Until in the end, with every man rocking in his saddle, bellowing: "Stay with him, kid!" "Spur him in the flank!" "Ride 'im, cowboy, ride im!" the bay stepped on a trailing rein, giving himself a savage jerk with the spade bit, and stopped short, panting with his useless exertions. The pilgrim, puffing also, gathered up his reins, put his feet in the stirrups, and gazed about.

"He didn't throw me that time," he said triumphantly.

"The best riders gets dumped off once in a while," Johnny Robb declared. "You certainly rode him, pilgrim. You're a rider an' a good 'un."

"Oh, I'm not really, though," the pilgrim explained. "I never rode a horse like that before."

"Darn seldom anybody ever did make a ride like that," Red Burgess assured him gaily. "You done darned well."

"He did, too," Mike Stratton said to Johnny Robb, when they moved off at a trot, all abreast, like cavalry on the march. "He stayed on top by main strength an' awkwardness. Got nerve, anyway, if he is green as new grass. Might make a hand yet, if he had a chance."

And that little gleam of admiration for the fellow who will take a sporting chance where he knows he is outclassed, eventually put the pilgrim on the Half Moon pay roll. Mike shrewdly observed him for three or four days. The pilgrim was never downcast. He had a damnable persistence. He would do anything he was asked to do, and the wags of the Half Moon asked him to do a number of things, all of which, when he discovered the humorous intent, he accepted good-naturedly.

So the roundup moved north to the railroad, into the town of Saco, to stock with grub. Here they were joined by three other outfits. And when Mike found himself still short-handed he put the pilgrim to work.

"He'll learn," Mike said to Johnny Robb. "He's the kind that does. Meantime he'll do to chase cattle, and relieve somebody on day herd, an' such."

"He's the funniest cuss I ever saw," Johnny confessed. "He sure admires them fancy trimmin's he wears. An' he thinks he's all set to be a bronco fighter since he managed to stay on that old crow-hopper."

"*You* couldn't ride Bay Billy," Mike pointed out. "Even by main strength an' luck, like he did."

"I'm a cowpuncher, not no rough rider," Johnny replied truthfully. "I take 'em gentle, or not at all. Let them that wants ride outlaw horses."

The pilgrim, it seemed, nursed that ambition. He had one primary qualification, too. He was afraid of nothing

in the shape of a horse. Johnny Robb said he didn't know enough to be scared. But he was the most awkward man in four roundup crews. Husky calves dragged bawling to the branding-fire tramped on the pilgrim, skinned his knuckles, butted him down. When he went to catch a horse the breadth of his loop and the scope of its swing kept everybody else out of the corral. He was a holy show and he furnished those capable young men with all sorts of diversion.

Yet Mike Stratton took note that the pilgrim, for all his awkwardness, for all his inexperience, despite the fact that he would innocently do any fool think any guileful cowpuncher suggested, made a tolerably useful hand. If he seemed always on the point of falling off a horse, he never did, or at least seldom, and he never let a horse get away from him. If he was thrown, he crawled aboard at once with a grin.

Many a horse piled him off once. Not one threw him a second time, so Mike observed, if the others didn't. He didn't lose cattle out of the day herd. He managed to get by on night guard. In fact he might ultimately become as good a stockhand as any, Mike reflected, if he would only get over being such a damned credulous fool.

But he would never be a rider, in the range sense of being able to ride anything. Few cowpunchers could—perhaps three out of every roundup crew. Mike himself could. So could Dick Burgess.

A new man joined the Half Moon at Saco. He was a rider too, a good one. He liked the distinction of riding bad horses. Burgess and this Frank Dodd rode all the bad horses in the outfit—"bad" inasmuch as they would invariably buck when mounted. If they could throw a man, they would throw him as fast as he got on. If they couldn't they forebore bucking and were as good as any other cowhorse, with the merit of being tough as whalebone for long rides.

Those were the kind of horses the pilgrim wanted to ride. Mike let him try on a sober scale. That is, he gave him two or three mounts in his string that would pitch a dozen jumps or so, when they were saddled on a nippy morning. And the pilgrim rode them as he rode Bay Billy, in a fearful and wonderful fashion. None of them ever threw him twice.

The Half Moon praised his riding extravagantly. Mike frowned on this. He didn't want the pilgrim spoiled. But he couldn't say anything. The cowpuncher was no ox to be muzzled. Mike had hope of the pilgrim becoming a useful hand around cattle. As a rough rider, he would be a total loss. Mike knew. So did his men. But sport was sport. The pilgrim was all too eager to be butchered to make a range holiday.

Frank Dodd, the last of the new men to join the Half Moon, expressed himself to Mike one day about the pilgrim's horsemanship.

"You know that darned fool will make a rider someday," he declared. "He's strong as a bull in the legs. He's game."

"Not in a thousand years," Mike snorted. "An' it's a crime to rib him up to it. A bad horse would pile him in two jumps. He's just like a sack of meal."

"I dunno," Dodd said thoughtfully. "I seen him at the Capital K horse ranch a week or two before he lit out for the Half Moon. He come there lookin' for a job. They had some fun with him. Give him two or three to

ride. He rode 'em. You take notice. He's awkward as sin, but he stays in the middle of 'em."

"Yes. Crow-hoppers. If he could ride for a horse outfit why didn't they keep him?" Mike inquired.

"Aw, shucks, a green man is plumb useless to a horse outfit," Dodd replied. "He didn't know beans. They want bronco fighters ready made."

"He'll never be one," Mike maintained. "He'd make a cowpuncher if you fellers would quit feedin' him taffy about his ridin'. He's beginnin' to think he can."

"By gosh, I believe he can, m'self," Dodd persisted.

Dodd himself could ride anything. Moreover, he was a smart man anyplace around a herd, and a smooth roper. But his opinion didn't carry weight with Mike Stratton. He tried to head the pilgrim off.

"You quit this givin' ridin' exhibitions for the boys, pilgrim," he said kindly one day. "You're liable to get hurt. Besides, I hired you for punchin' cows. Ridin' bad horses is not your long suit—not with the Half Moon, anyway."

With which Mike ceased to bother about the pilgrim's horsemanship. The general roundup, of which the Half Moon was an important part, swung over the plains north of Milk River, hauled south to the Larb Hills, west through the Little Rockies, farther west till the Bear Paw mountains stood up above them like the teeth of a giant saw. Then they swept across the flat reach of the Gros Ventre reservation, sorting out and branding calves by the thousand, until at last the dust and heat and press of spring roundup ended on the sagebrush flats by Saco two days before the Fourth of July.

Here in a pleasant camp on the bank of Milk River, loafing in the shade of leafy cottonwoods, they caught up on lost sleep and talked about the Fourth of July celebration.

And the pilgrim, ludicrous in his enormous hat, which had gone floppy in the brim from the spring rains, in his batwinged chaps without which he seemed to think himself unclad, mourned because he could not rope well enough to take part in the tying-down contest—for which a saloonkeeper offered a hundred-dollar prize. Nor was he skillful enough to bulldog a steer, which would also return profit and glory. Neither had he a sprinting cowpony to match against any other quarter horse.

"The damn fool thinks that he'll go in the rough-ridin' contest, though," Johnny Robb said to Mike Stratton. "Ain't he the choicest in captivity?"

Johnny quivered with mirth. The pilgrim had never really seen bad horses in action. The Fourth of July contest, for which some townsmen had put up two hundred and fifty dollars in gold and a beautifully stamped Menea saddle would bring out the best riders and the worst horses in a region noted for both.

Every cow outfit, every big horse ranch, had outlaw horses. They were, so to speak, a by-product of the range business, useless for anything but Wild West exhibitions. They were not outlaws because no man could ride them. The range-bred riders who could rode anything. But when a horse for any reason got the habit of bucking high, wide and handsome in an effort to throw his rider, he went into the discard. And every outfit owned such horses. The Half Moon, the Ragged H, the YT, had in their *remudas* horses

gentle to handle, to saddle, handsome brutes with spur and saddle marks on them. But they were never used for range work. They were never saddled except on a bet, to make a braggart prove that he *could* ride.

These were the beasts that rough riders would mount in the contest—they would pitch high and hard and fast and crooked till they threw their man or stopped from exhaustion. And when the Half Moon contemplated the pilgrim crawling aboard one of these snaky brutes they snickered in their separate sleeves.

The Fourth dawned cool and still on the Saco flats, all yellow with ripe grass between clumps of gray sage. Meadowlarks caroled in that fresh, sweet hour when the sunbeams were hunting shadows out of the low ground. By noon the earth would crackle with midsummer heat and dust would rise in sharp puffs wherever a hoof struck ground. But neither heat nor dust made much difference to cowboys either at work or on a holiday. They were used to both. By night some of them would be broke, some drunk, all happy. In that pleasant hour as they rode from camp where the tents fluttered in a morning breeze and the dew was scarcely gone, they looked forward with eagerness to a big day.

"Pilgrim," Mike said, as they dismounted before the Ark for a drink to start the day, "keep outa that ridin' contest. Maybe you'll be a rider someday but you're sure outa luck in this show."

"Oh, I dunno," the pilgrim answered loftily.

"I'm tellin' you so you will know," Mike replied.

He said no more. He was no guardian of fools who *would* rush in. He knew the cowpunchers would egg the pilgrim on to any folly. And since Mike had a kindly feeling for this extremely verdant young man he quietly put a bug in the ear of the committee in charge of the rough riding, and they agreed to bar the pilgrim for his own good.

Neither the committee nor Mike nor Johnny Robb was prepared for the roar the pilgrim emitted when he was not allowed to ride. He had taken a drink or two and he was noisy in his grief. He proclaimed to all and sundry that the Menea saddle and the two hundred and fifty dollars gold was his except for a conspiracy. He was a rider and a stranger and they were afraid of him.

The pilgrim had drawn all his wages that morning. By noon he was wandering about jingling a handful of ten-dollar gold pieces offering to bet he could ride anything they could produce that wore hoofs, horns, or hair.

And curiously he had the moral support and open sympathy of Frank Dodd, who had suggested to Mike that in spite of his awkwardness the pilgrim really could ride. Dodd was lit up like a Christmas tree by then and no one paid much attention to either of their offers to bet money on the pilgrim's horsemanship.

The roping, the quarter-horse races, and the bulldogging came off on schedule and the victors covered themselves with dust and sweat and glory. At three in the afternoon the bad horses were led in and saddled one by one to do their stuff before a hilarious audience. The Menea saddle and the purse went to a Rolling M man from the Larb Hills. That was the climax of a perfect day and the crowd turned to the saloons.

About five o'clock Johnny Robb came grinning to Mike Stratton.

"All right with you if I go get Nigger White, Mike?" he asked.

"Why, yes," Mike answered. "But what the dickens do you want with him?"

"The pilgrim's goin' to ride him right here in the street," Johnny burbled. "He's bet me fifty dollars he can fan him to a fare-you-well."

"It's a crime," Mike protested.

"Oh, I'll give him back his money," Johnny chortled. "But he's hell-bent to ride. Be some fun."

Nigger White was a bay Half Moon horse with a reputation from the Flathead to the Dakota line. There were men who had ridden him, but few who hankered to ride him twice. He wasn't vicious. He didn't bite, kick, strike, or throw himself backward. But he could buck. Yea and verily! He weighed eleven hundred. He had the speed and activity of a thoroughbred and the staying qualities of a mustang. He had never been ridden outside of a three-hundred-yard radius since he was a four-year-old and threw a Negro bronco twister over the top of a ten-foot corral—and the colored brother's face when he picked himself up was what gave the bay horse his name.

"Why, the damn crazy fool!" Mike said disgustedly.

"A fool an' his money are easy parted," Johnny grinned. "He's been belly-achin' around that he was gypped outa the prize. He's rarin' to show us he can ride. Wants to bet the works. Why shouldn't we accommodate him? He'll never learn younger. An' he picked Nigger White cause he said the reason they didn't use Nigger in the contest was nobody could ride him straight up —an' he *can*."

Mike laughed. "Go to it," said he. "Nigger won't hurt him, that's one thing. But he'll throw him so high the eagles'll build nests in his hair. Do the damn fool good."

Johnny vanished. Twenty minutes later Mike saw him come leading Nigger White from the Half Moon *remuda*. As Mike watched the pilgrim drag his heavy double-rig out into the dusty street, his conscience smote him a little. But there was no stopping it now.

The sidewalk was lined with expectant faces. Among them Mike heard murmurs, snatches of conversation. He hunted around until he got hold of one of his own men. The whispers were correct. The pilgrim was backing his horsemanship with money. Frank Dodd, reeling-drunk, was still offering to take bets that the pilgrim would "ride 'im an' whip 'im."

A bartender sidled up to Mike. "Kin this feller sure ride?" he asked in an undertone.

Mike shook his head.

"They're bettin' a heap of money he can," the bartender murmured. "My boss is holdin' the stakes behind the bar."

"Who's bettin' he can?" Mike asked incredulously.

"Well, mostly this Dodd party," the bartender admitted.

"He's loaded to the guards," Mike snorted. "An' the pilgrim's just plumb crazy with the heat, I guess. It's a shame to take their money."

"Maybe," the bartender grinned. "But she's a good show for the boys, just the same."

The pilgrim got his cinches tight, shook the saddle gently. The big, deep-chested bay turned a bright eye on the audience, pricked up his ears. He was gentle as a pet dog till a rider's leg

crossed him.

Johnny Robb eased his horse over to the sidewalk with a wide smile of anticipation. The pilgrim stood at his reins' end for a second or two. His floppy hat drooped. His chaps had rents in them. His cheap boots had run over at the heel. He looked frayed and cheap and ridiculous and Mike felt sorry for him. And the pilgrim was speaking to his waiting audience.

"You fellers think I can't ride. Well, I can. I've done told you I could. I shoulda had that prize money. You've done bet me I can't ride this crowbait. Well, you can kiss your money goodby. Don't say I didn't tell you. The money you've all bet ag'in' me is a gift."

Then he turned to Nigger White, gathered his reins tight, eased his foot into the stirrup, hooked the fingers of his right hand over the horn, and went up.

So did Nigger White. His blazed face sunk between his knees, he rose in the air like a soaring bird and hit the ground stiff-legged with a snort like a buck deer.

Mike held his breath for ten seconds. The pilgrim rocked and swayed. But he didn't leave the saddle. He didn't lose either stirrup. For ten swift arching buck-jumps he jabbed his spurs home every time Nigger White plunged. Then he snatched the floppy hat off his head with one free hand and fanned the Half Moon's worst horse, meanwhile letting out an occasional shrill whoop to match the equally shrill whoops of Frank Dodd, who capered in the dust, yelling:

"Ride 'm pilgrim! Ride 'm 'n' rake 'im. Whoop—ee—ee!"

And the pilgrim rode, whipping, spurring, yelling, through all the varied repertoire. Nigger White pitched straight ahead, swapped ends in the air, sunfished. His best effort couldn't dislodge his pack. Not once did the pilgrim pull leather. He kept his rein hand out in front. Not once did he cease to whip and spur and yell.

And since Nigger White nor any other horse could last long in that dizzy swirl of equine agitation the pilgrim presently sat triumphant in the middle of a panting, blown buck-jumper entirely devoid of any further ambition to buck him off.

"Have I rode him?" the pilgrim croaked. His face was red from exertion.

"You sure have," they chorused. "You sure win."

"Can he ride?" Frank Dodd shouted. "I'll tell a man he can ride!"

No one disagreed with him. But most of the Half Moon cowpunchers, Mike noticed, were not particularly enthusiastic in the admission.

"All right." The pilgrim stepped down and unsaddled. He faced the Half Moon group with a broad grin. "The drinks are on you fellers. I told you I could ride."

"You go plumb to hell," Johnny Robb grunted sourly. "You're ridin' looks fishy to me. Go buy your own drinks."

"I will," the pilgrim said cheerfully. "But I'll buy 'em with your money, old-timer."

He and Frank Dodd disappeared together into the saloon where the stakes were held. The Half Moon crowd stood in a knot on the sidewalk. They didn't look altogether happy.

"Well," Johnny Robb said finally, "it looks like them two made suckers of us."

"You've been havin' a heap of fun

with the pilgrim the last two months," Mike pointed out. "You bet he couldn't ride an' he showed you he could. You got no license to roar. How much did you all lose?"

"Cleaned me," Johnny Robb grumbled, and stalked away. Others named various amounts. Mike whistled, first in surprise, finally in sheer amusement.

Between them the pilgrim and Frank Dodd had taken just about all the loose change in the Half Moon, with a few odd bets from outside stockhands. The pilgrim had put up only the original fifty with Johnny Robb—but Dodd apparently had taken every bet offered in his alcoholic enthusiasm for the pilgrim. The total ran to something over eight hundred dollars.

"Well, you fellers went lookin' for it, an' you found it," Mike said at last. "The pilgrim ain't a pretty rider but he *is* a rider. He didn't tell no lie—we just didn't believe him, that's all."

Neither the pilgrim nor Frank Dodd were much in evidence the rest of that evening. Dodd became apparently helplessly drunk, and the pilgrim got him a room in the Harper House, and went early to bed himself. Nor was either man in the Half Moon camp when the riders answered the cook's strident call to breakfast.

Mike Stratton, Johnny Robb, and Red Burgess rode into Saco after breakfast. As they dismounted by a hitching-rack the westbound passenger came drumming up the tracks.

Johnny and Red strolled across to the depot platform. Saco got only brief stops. When they stepped up on the planking the pilgrim and Frank Dodd were heaving sacked saddles into the baggage car. They turned to the steps of a coach.

The pilgrim had doffed his exaggerated cowboy gear. He had on new boots and a plain serge suit. He looked somehow rather more capable, rather more like a competent range rider than he had ever looked around the Half Moon camp.

The train barely halted. It gathered way again, slid along the platform.

"Hey, you leavin' us?" Johnny Robb called in surprise.

The pilgrim, a coach length away and gathering speed, cupped his hands over his mouth and called back:

"Just tell the boys you saw me but you didn't see me saw!"

Neither Johnny Robb nor Red Burgess understood this cryptic reference. But they did understand the insulting significance of the pilgrim's last visible gesture. He put his thumb to his nose and waggled the fingers of that hand derisively at them.

Johnny Robb flipped out his gun. Not to slay, only to waft a bullet-breeze by the pilgrim's face to warn him he couldn't deride and insult his betters with impunity. But Johnny had a level head. He didn't shoot—since he reflected that a .45 slug would plow through the wood of that day coach and that innocent people sat unsuspecting inside.

So the pilgrim passed and the joint hope of great sport and a quick turnover in cash, which had warmed the Half Moon riders the day before, passed with him.

WHEN fall roundup began, a rep from the Judith Basin ambled with his string into the Half Moon camp. Somebody mentioned the pilgrim incident a day or so later. The rep exhibited curiosity, asked questions, snorted.

"Say," he inquired, "was this other feller, this Dodd, a lean, lank party with a face like a hawk? A pretty good all-'round hand? Did this fool pilgrim ride a Gallup & Frazier double-rig?"

"Yes," they chorused.

"An' this pilgrim he was sure green an' awkward? Not very tall, kinda thick-shouldered, an' round-faced?"

"That's him to a T," said they.

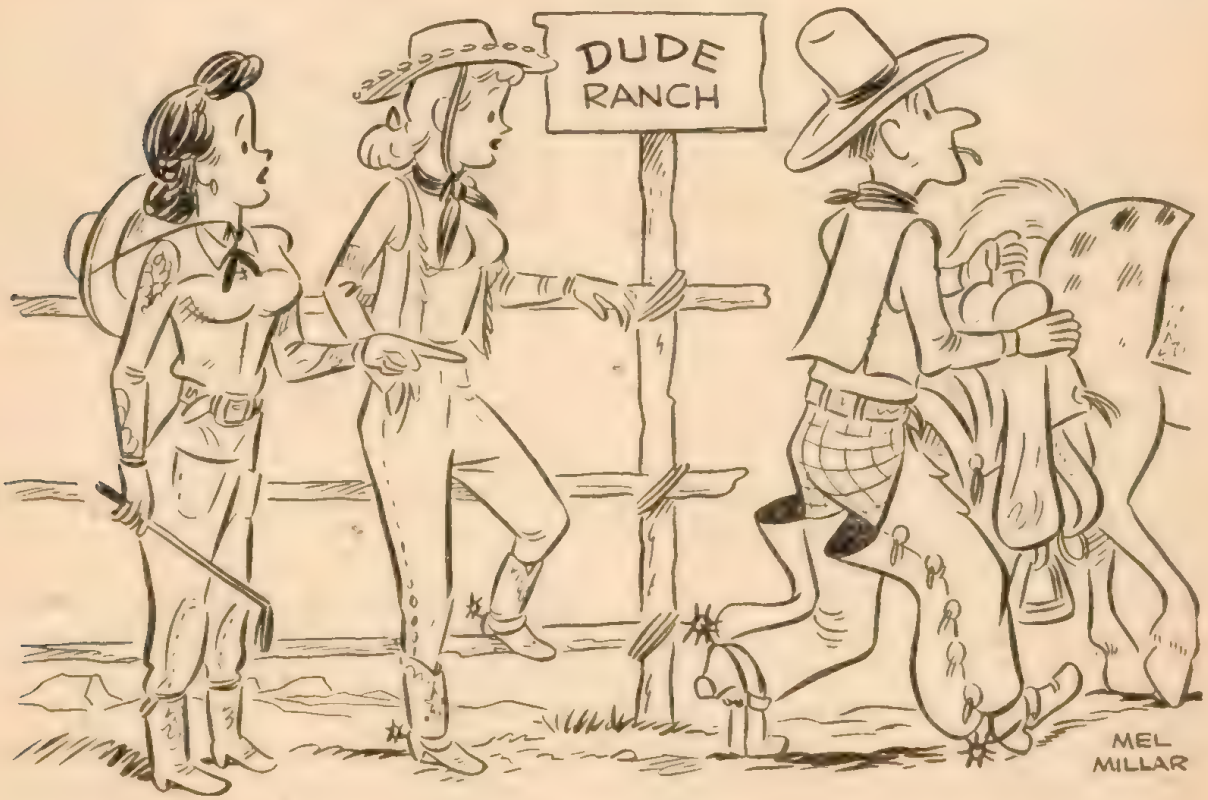
"Didja ever hear of Kid McIntyre, that won the world's championship at a Frontier Day celebration at Denver three years ago?" the rep asked with apparent irrelevance.

Everybody had heard of Kid McIntyre—a riding fool, who needed only a *haquima* and a pair of spurs to stay in the middle of any horse that ever snorted through a pair of nostrils.

"Well, your pilgrim was Kid McIntyre," the rep chuckled. "This Frank Dodd is his partner. Real name is Swift. They worked that same play on a horse outfit in the Judith early last fall. They pulled it over on the Yellowstone a while before that. They get a lot of fun out of it—an' they make it pay. How much did they touch you all for?"

"Speakin' for m'self," Johnny Robb answered sadly, "I'm still overdrawed two month's pay from the outfit. The sawed-off, hammered-down runt could sure ride. He fooled us plenty. I'd like to meet up with that there green, awkward pilgrim for just about a minute."

But neither Johnny nor any of the Half Moon ever did. The pilgrim was afar, seeking fresh fields in which to make his peculiar sense of humor produce liberal dividends.



"Look! Open-toed pants!"

FREE-FOR-ALL

BACK in '48, when we published Thomas Thompson's first ZGWM story, "Renegade," he confessed that, having then recently moved from his native California to Portland, Oregon, with an eye to salmon steaks and razor clams, he had started dreaming of California's enchiladas and tacos. Apparently those dreams proved irresistible, for Tommy has now moved his family back to California, settling in Santa Rosa. Wherever he hangs his hat, though, we'll expect him to keep turning out the kind of high-quality Western-fiction excitement exemplified by "Gunman Brand," this month's complete novel—which, by the way, is already scheduled for book publication by Doubleday. One of Tommy's best short stories to date will appear in next month's ZGWM.

• Ross Ringler, range drifter extraordinary, returns for another adventure in this month's novelette, George Appell's "The Whispering Hills." George is already working on yet another Ringler yarn, which must be good news for rough-hewn Ross's fans.

• Joseph Chadwick, author of "A Miracle in His Holster," tells us "It's taken me a long time to 'hit' ZGWM, but I've been around in most of the other Western-story magazines for quite some time. There was one year when fifty-three of my stories and novelettes appears in the Westerns. I started selling fiction back in '35, doing serials for the newspaper syndicates; I'd work ten hours a day at a job, then come home and write two thousand words a night. Depression times, remember?

"I've worked at a lot of jobs, most of them best forgotten, but my first, when I was twelve, was printer's devil on a country newspaper. I was managing a theater when I was twenty, and working as a day laborer a couple years later. Found my niche about ten years ago, when I smartened up and began writing Western stories. No more jobs for me! My family consists of a wife who considers herself a typewriter widow, a nineteen-year-old son who aspires to be a Western-story writer but now is in the Army, and a small dog of nondescript ancestry."

• "Uncle Bill's Last Battle," Harold Preece's article, is substantial fact, although names of the principal characters have been changed. "For certain reasons," says Hal, "I gave Uncle Bill and his brother the surname of 'Tarle-

ton' in the piece. It would probably have been more merciful if those buckies could have died with their age and together awaited Judgment in Boot Hill, where the company would have been congenial. A lot of home-town memories went into this piece—such a nice, sleepy little place it was then, though definitely not sleepy any more! Once, I was the maverick kid there, as Uncle Bill was the maverick adult. Now when I go back, people I haven't seen in twenty years hail me to tell me they've read something of mine."

• Bertrand W. Sinclair, whose amusing yarn, "The Jocular Pilgrim," we reprint this month, was known on the Montana ranges many years ago as the "Fiddleback Kid," having been a rider for the Hooper and Huckvale Milk River spread, which branded with the outline of a fiddle on the left ribs. "The old cow-range period," he asserts, "was a dramatic and occasionally violent way of life, and it was also the greatest pastoral movement in the history of the world; as such, the time and the people deserve more serious consideration than has yet been fully accorded them in either fiction or American history."

From the mailbag: Mrs. D. Rechsteiner, of Elberfield, Ind., writes: "My husband and I both enjoy ZGWM. He always thought he preferred the rough action-packed stories, but enjoyed 'The Call of the Canyon' as much as any story he ever read. I get pleasure from them all. So whether your stories are realistic and down to earth, or filled with romance, they are always good."

• Another great Norman A. Fox Western novel, *Shadow on the Range*, is to be published in the Dell Book pocket-edition series in September. Watch for it on the newsstands.

And don't forget next month's All Star ZGWM—see page 2 for details!

—THE EDITORS.

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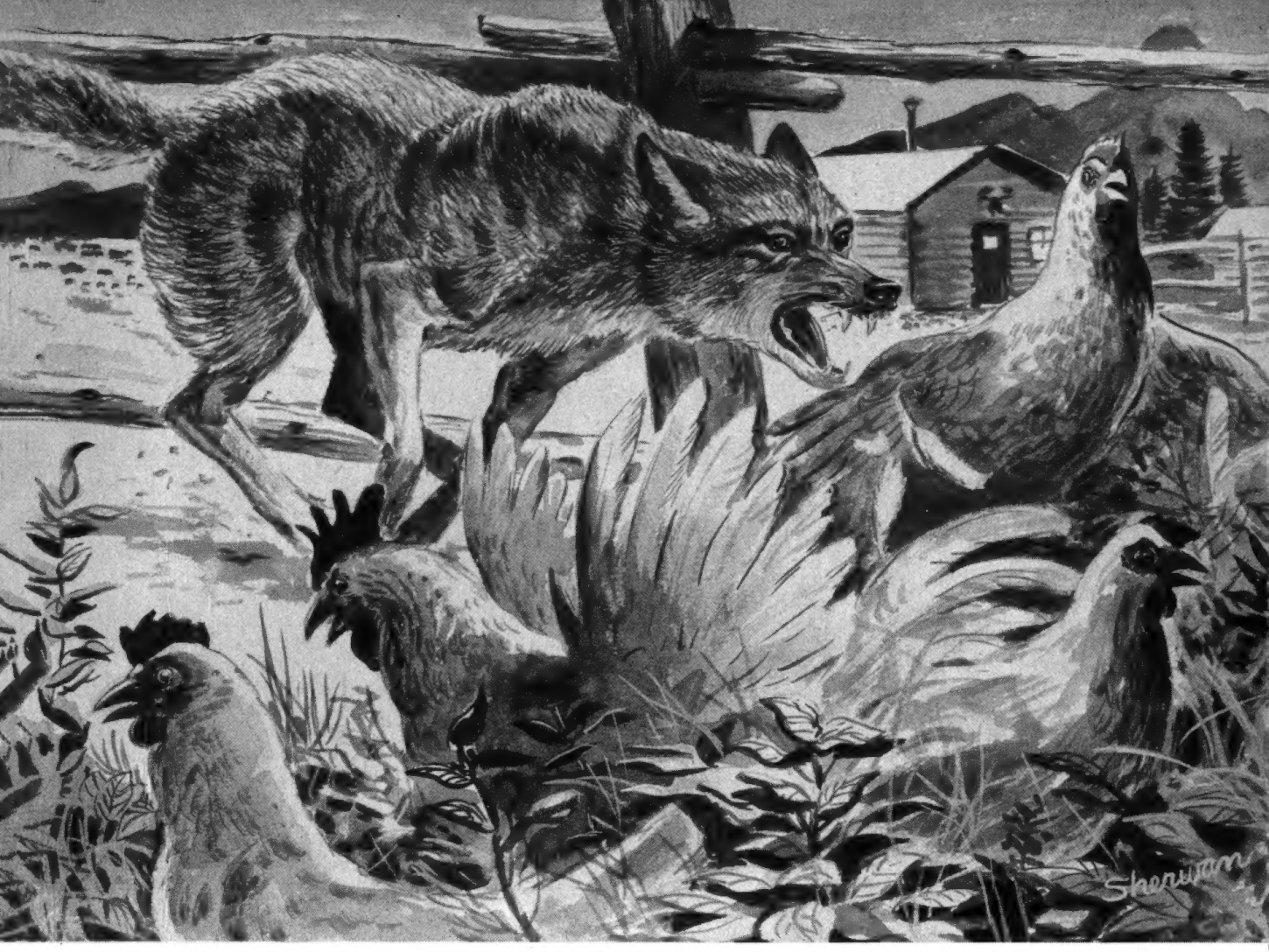

PLAINS PHANTOM

IN SPITE OF PREDATOR CONTROL and changing conditions, the coyote is still a common sight on the Western plains. This "prairie wolf" or "little wolf," weighing about thirty pounds on the average, can be most destructive to livestock. Where abundant, coyotes make poultry-raising next to impossible; unprotected sheep and cattle are not immune from the voracious beast. On the other side of the ledger, the coyote does man a service in the control of rodents and other crop or tree destroyers. Various harmful insects often help fill his receptive belly. Elusiveness and a frustratingly uncanny ability to sense whether or not a man is armed have given the coyote a "coward" label. In combat with animals of his own size, however, he proves a ferocious fighter. A decidedly crafty fellow, he often treats snares, traps, and even poisoned meat with impudence. Thousands of bounty dollars are spent annually in the effort to exterminate him, but the phantom of the plains will undoubtedly be with us for a long time to come.

EARL SHERWAN

In This Issue:

GUNMAN BRAND, *by Thomas Thompson*

A rousing action novel by a favorite Western author. Milo Stuart, gunman-in-chief for smooth Sam Templin, sees trouble ahead when Glen Lacey drives his Wagon Tongue herd into Big Valley. Not only trouble for Sam, but for himself: Milo has been treasuring the memory of Margaret Lacey for years—and trying to forget Glen Lacey, whose wastrel son once fell before Milo's guns. Cutting loose from Sam Templin's ruthless plans, Milo also has to break with Lily Devore, Sam's beauteous business partner whose love for Milo is as hopeless as it is fierce. Marked for death by Sam's hired killers, distrusted by the Wagon Tongue, Milo plays a lone game—a game which ends in merciless, grim gun reckoning.

THE WHISPERING HILLS, *by George C. Appell*

A Ross Ringler novelette. Horizon-bound, Ringler stumbles onto a corpse, ties in with a queer maverick of a sheriff to trap an overpublicized bandit—and, deep in the Whispering Hills, reads a blurred page from the book of his past.

A MIRACLE IN HIS HOLSTER, *by Joseph Chadwick*

There's a difference between toughness and heartlessness —as Sheriff Pat Monahan proves in his handling of the case of that mad-dog killer, the Brazos Kid.

UNCLE BILL'S LAST BATTLE, *by Harold Preece*

The final fight of Texas's beloved old badman was waged against a flickering figure on a silver screen.

—and other top-notch stories and features about America's unforgettable Old West era.